

Chapter 6

Telemedicine Services: Opportunities and Developments in Italy

Alessandra Tafuro

Università del Salento, Italy

Giuseppe Dammacco

Università degli studi di Bari, Italy

ABSTRACT

Telemedicine services, with the collection and sharing of patient clinical data, have gone from an emergency response during the pandemic to an essential structural investment for the Italian health system. Telemedicine is a part of the main digital transformation process in healthcare and is establishing itself as a key technological tool to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the system. Indeed, it can make the difference in each phase of healthcare, from prevention to access to care, up to the real patient care, helping to shift the center of gravity of the Italian healthcare system moving from the centralized care in the hospitals to home healthcare. Through a literature review, an overview of the telemedicine in the Italian context is proposed, discussing the factors that facilitate its development, the main barriers to its implementation, and the future prospects of these digital tools that are useful to support the National Healthcare System.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the healthcare provision is affected by many different types of factors: a) economic, limited budgets and restrictions on spending for the healthcare structures; b) social and health, from the aging populations, the increasing demands of healthcare as consequence of the diffusion of chronic (i.e. cardiovascular diseases, peasant respiratory diseases and diabetes) or new diseases (i.e. cancer, stress, anxiety) to the diffusion of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Certainly Covid-19 was not the start of the digital health revolution, but it has certainly been a major driver in its widespread adoption in the last two years. If, on one hand, doctors and specialists could

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8868-0.ch006

not see their patients in person, on the other, people continued to need consultations, therefore moving diagnoses online was the only option to continue delivering care directly to patients.

Numerous studies have shown that information systems in the medical field are an important driver of organizational change. In fact, the measurement of the value brought by the use of technologies in healthcare, in particular considering electronic medical records, if carried out by adopting a different approach than the classic measurement in economic-financial terms, highlights how this tool can contribute to the improvement of performance of healthcare entities by increasing organizational efficiency and effectiveness and improving the quality of organization processes and services. In addition, the clinical use of some information and communication technologies (ICT) applications, such as Web 2.0 and Social Media, can easily involve groups of the population at risk or who suffer from chronic diseases, promoting an improvement of the relative quality of care. Furthermore, through the use of ICT, it is possible to simplify both the interactions among the various patients and those between the latter and health professionals and to offer patient-centered services with personalized treatment paths.

Sharing of information among various care providers is becoming an essential feature of health systems, and many countries are adopting policies to promote the exchange of clinical information, through the electronic transfer of data or information among healthcare organizations (Guerrazzi, 2020).

To this end, the implementation of electronic health records is also a relevant solution, which, in the literature, is associated with improvements in documentation, screening performance and the reduction of prescription errors (Priestman et al. 2018). Despite the potential benefits deriving from the adoption of the electronic health records, some studies show that in Italy the coordination mechanisms between the different levels of governance of the health system is slowing down its use (Cucciniello et al. 2014; Nasi et al., 2015; Cucciniello et al. 2016).

Telemedicine represents one of the major innovations in healthcare services, both for the economic and social perspectives and the technological point of view, playing a key role in the accessibility to healthcare services, and in the process implemented to improve the quality of medical care and organizational efficiency.

Despite its many advantages recognized by the literature (see Table 1), there are significant barriers and problems to the expansion and standardizing telemedicine. The main one, seemingly, regards the use of the Information and Communication Technologies in general and in the healthcare system, in particular. Data highlight that, despite there being a strong will to increase the activities of telemedicine, the latter still has a limited presence in clinical and healthcare settings, and it appears more developed in countries where healthcare is not public, where there is a high digital access and a good digital literacy. The main goal of this study is to promote the culture of digital healthcare, highlighting the need for an effective collaboration among different stakeholders involved in healthcare. To achieve this goal, they must be able to speak a common language and have a clear vision of the core concepts and terms that characterize a telemedicine program.

BACKGROUND

In the last decades, most economic sectors have embraced digital disruption as factor to consider in the corporate assets, not just as a tool for fighting competition, but also as an asset for survival. If compared to the few experiences that highlight the effects of the digital revolution - that certainly represent best practices in this sector – the healthcare sector lags.

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