



SHORT COMMUNICATION

Commentary: Transforming Mental Health Care in Pakistan through Telemedicine.

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ABSTRACT... This commentary explores the transformative potential of telemedicine in addressing mental health care challenges in Pakistan, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. With approximately 34% of the population suffering from various mental disorders and significant barriers to treatment—such as social stigma, poverty, and limited access to resources—telemedicine offers a critical solution for delivering care, especially in underserved rural areas where traditional services are lacking. The article discusses the benefits of remote consultations, including increased accessibility, flexible scheduling, and reduced stigma, particularly for vulnerable populations like women who face additional societal barriers. However, it also highlights key challenges, such as the digital divide, with approximately 45% of the population lacking reliable internet access, and the urgent need for training among mental health professionals to effectively utilize telehealth platforms. The commentary advocates for a comprehensive approach that includes improving technological infrastructure, enhancing digital literacy, and community education to fully harness telemedicine's potential. Future research is essential to evaluate its long-term efficacy and inform policy decisions. Ultimately, telemedicine could play a vital role in reshaping mental health care delivery in Pakistan, fostering greater access and engagement in a post-pandemic world.

Key words: COVID-19 Pandemic, E-mental Health, Stigma, Tele Psychiatry, Technology in Healthcare.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically transformed healthcare delivery across the globe, emphasizing the need for innovative solutions to maintain access to care. In Pakistan, where mental health issues have long been overshadowed by a lack of resources and social stigma, telemedicine has emerged as a critical tool to bridge gaps in mental health service delivery. This commentary aims to critically assess the implications of telemedicine for mental health care in Pakistan, exploring both its potential benefits and the challenges it faces in local contexts.

The Mental Health Landscape in Pakistan

Pakistan is grappling with a significant mental health crisis, with estimates suggesting that nearly 34% of the population suffers from some form of mental disorder, yet only a fraction receives adequate treatment.¹ Factors such as poverty, social stigma, and limited access to qualified mental health professionals exacerbate

the problem. In rural areas, where mental health resources are almost nonexistent, telemedicine presents a unique opportunity to deliver care remotely, potentially reaching populations that traditional services cannot.

The pandemic has further highlighted the urgency of addressing mental health needs. A study conducted in 2021 reported a 60% increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms among the Pakistani population during lockdowns.² In this context, telemedicine has become not just a convenience but a necessity for many individuals seeking mental health support.

Telemedicine: A Promising Solution

Telemedicine facilitates remote consultations between mental health professionals and patients, allowing for flexible scheduling and reducing the need for travel—an essential advantage in a country where many individuals live in remote areas with limited transportation options.

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According to a recent study, 75% of patients reported feeling comfortable using telehealth services for mental health consultations, citing ease of access and the ability to remain in a familiar environment as significant benefits.³

Moreover, telemedicine can help reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health care. In a conservative society like Pakistan, where mental health issues are often viewed with skepticism, the anonymity offered by virtual consultations can encourage individuals to seek help without fear of judgment.⁴ This is particularly relevant for women, who face additional barriers in accessing healthcare services due to cultural norms.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite its potential, the implementation of telemedicine in Pakistan is not without challenges. One of the foremost barriers is the digital divide. Although internet usage has grown significantly, approximately 45% of the population still lacks reliable internet access, particularly in rural areas.⁵ This disparity limits the effectiveness of telemedicine as a universal solution for mental health care.

Another critical concern is the need for training mental health professionals in the effective use of telehealth platforms. A study from 2021 indicated that only 30% of healthcare providers in Pakistan felt adequately trained to conduct tele psychiatry sessions.⁶ Continuous professional development and training are essential to maximize the efficacy of telemedicine in mental health care.

Personal Insights and Broader Implications

From my perspective as a psychiatrist working in Pakistan, I see telemedicine as a transformative tool that can reshape the mental health landscape. However, its success hinges on a multi-faceted approach that includes enhancing technological infrastructure, addressing digital literacy, and training providers. Policymakers must prioritize these areas to fully harness the potential of telemedicine.

The government of Pakistan, along with private stakeholders and NGOs, can play a pivotal

role in developing frameworks that promote telemedicine. Initiatives to improve internet connectivity, particularly in underserved areas, will be crucial in ensuring equitable access to mental health services. Furthermore, community-based programs that educate the public about mental health and the availability of telehealth services can help destigmatize seeking care.⁷

Future Directions

Looking ahead, it is imperative to invest in research evaluating the long-term efficacy and impact of telemedicine on mental health outcomes in Pakistan. Comprehensive studies should focus on diverse populations to assess satisfaction levels, treatment adherence, and clinical outcomes. Collaborative efforts among mental health organizations, educational institutions, and government agencies can facilitate the collection of data necessary for informed policy-making.⁸ Furthermore, exploring hybrid models that combine in-person and telehealth services could enhance patient care by offering the flexibility to meet individual needs. Such models can be particularly beneficial in managing chronic mental health conditions that require ongoing support and monitoring.⁹

CONCLUSION

Telemedicine holds substantial promise for improving mental health care delivery in Pakistan, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While challenges remain, the potential for increased access, reduced stigma, and enhanced patient engagement make it a critical area for development. By investing in technological infrastructure, training, and community outreach, Pakistan can leverage telemedicine to address its mental health crisis more effectively.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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AUTHORSHIP AND CONTRIBUTION DECLARATION

No.	Author(s) Full Name	Contribution to the paper	Author(s) Signature
1	Khadeeja Ishtiaq	Conceptualization: Developed the primary idea and structure of the article. Writing – Original Draft: Prepared the initial draft and conducted the primary literature review. Data Analysis: Interpreted key studies and incorporated findings into the manuscript.	
2	Waris Salman Shah	Writing – Review & Editing: Critically reviewed the manuscript for accuracy, clarity, and intellectual content. Contextual Input: Provided insights on local challenges in telemedicine implementation. Supervision: Guided the overall direction of the commentary and ensured alignment with journal standards.	