



Telemedicine and mhealth in Oman

In Oman, the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) is alarmingly high, contributing to 72% of all deaths in the country. Specifically, nearly one-third of the population suffers from high blood pressure. To address the health needs of people living with NCDs, the healthcare system in Oman has established integrated management programmes within primary health care centers. These centers have dedicated clinics for hypertension, diabetes and asthma.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the reassignment of several primary health care centers to cater to the management of COVID-19 patients. Consequently, the Ministry of Health took proactive measures to reorient and reorganize healthcare services, ensuring the provision of adequate care for people living with NCDs.

To optimize healthcare delivery, primary health care centers were instructed to assess patients based on their condition control levels. This assessment allowed for the identification of the most suitable service modality for each patient's care and follow-up. Telemedicine and mhealth solutions, primarily in the form of phone consultations, were employed to provide remote health services to individuals with well-controlled NCDs. Moreover, in collaboration with volunteers across different governorates, medications were secured and delivered to patients' homes.

Recognizing the importance of mental health, hotlines were introduced to cater to the needs of individuals with mental health conditions, including both healthcare workers and the general public. Additionally, various services were implemented to support self-management and promote healthy lifestyles while adhering to physical distancing measures. These services included the use of mass and social media platforms to disseminate information on self-management techniques for NCDs and mental health conditions. Furthermore, instructions were provided on how to self-monitor and share measurements such as blood pressure and blood sugar levels. Reminders for appointments, cancellations and rescheduling were also sent to patients, along with medication prescriptions and collection times.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the newly implemented interventions and modalities aimed at ensuring uninterrupted care for people living with NCDs, the Ministry of Health in Oman conducted two rapid assessments. These assessments specifically focused on the impact of the reorientation of NCD services and psychiatric services on respective patients. To gather the necessary data, structured electronic questionnaires in Arabic were utilized, which patients self-administered.

The assessments aimed to achieve the following objectives:

Assess the accessibility and availability of medications for patients who were receiving follow-up care in NCD and psychiatric clinics.

Evaluate the extent of coverage provided by the newly introduced initiatives.

Identify patients who reported not having received their medications or required contact from their healthcare facility.

Determine the feasibility of conducting rapid assessments through self-administered questionnaires and utilizing the internet as a communication platform during times of crisis.

Based on the findings from the assessments, the Ministry of Health in Oman has taken steps to enhance healthcare service delivery and improve accessibility for people living with NCDs and mental health conditions. These assessments have provided valuable guidance, leading to the implementation of the following measures:

Integration of telemedicine consultations, offered through healthcare facilities, into the main healthcare information management system known as the Al Shifa System. This integration ensures proper and systematic documentation of telemedicine interactions and was carried out in collaboration with the Information Technology Department.

Development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to establish standardized practices for NCD services in primary health care, including e-health and telemedicine. Currently, SOPs for tele-psychiatric services are being developed to ensure consistent and reliable care in that domain as well.

Introduction of strategies and interventions to support patients and their caregivers in self-managing their conditions. Additionally, efforts are being made to expand collaborations with private pharmacies, aiming to provide blood pressure and blood glucose measurement devices at reduced rates.

Presently, Oman is making investments in technology to reinforce patients' ability to self-manage their diseases. This includes the expansion of telemedicine and digital health services, as well as the establishment of educational and training platforms for healthcare providers. These initiatives aim to leverage technology to improve healthcare provision, patient education and the overall management of health conditions.

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