

## Remote health services provision during the COVID-19 pandemic | Synopses



### Islamic Republic of Iran

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) account for 81% of deaths, prompting the adoption of digital health and telemedicine during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telephone hotlines were established in six provinces, expanding to three dedicated hotlines for COVID-19 consultations and support. Screening services reached 78 million individuals through phone or online self-assessment, followed by early case detection, contact tracing and outpatient care for high risk groups. Telemedicine platforms like virtual clinics and online booking services saw a surge in usage, providing around 5000 online health services daily. Telephone follow-up for NCD patients was integrated into the national guidelines, while a dedicated hotline (4030) catered to cancer care during the pandemic. Nongovernmental organizations offered counselling and guidance to immunosuppressed and cancer patients. Training and capacity-building sessions were conducted to enhance cancer care expertise, and the Mask application facilitated smart physical distancing and quarantine measures.

## **Jordan**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jordan implemented various initiatives to address disruptions in healthcare services. To support tobacco cessation, a helpline for remote services was established, providing free consultations and medications to priority groups. The Ministry of Health received a donation of nicotine replacement therapy, aiding smoking cessation efforts. Efforts are underway to expand tobacco cessation services in primary healthcare and utilize WHO's virtual health worker, Florence. In response to the mental health needs, telemedicine and mobile health approaches were adopted, and two mental health hotlines were created. Healthcare providers are being trained to meet the growing demand, and awareness campaigns are being conducted. To ensure access to NCD medications, a web-based tool assessed the impact of the lockdown, and interventions were proposed, including helplines and home delivery. Digital records were updated, and telemedicine and mobile health are being explored for essential healthcare services and medication delivery.

## **Oman**

In Oman, noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) account for 72% of deaths, with a significant portion suffering from high blood pressure. Primary health care centers have dedicated clinics for NCDs, but the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted services. To address this, the Ministry of Health implemented telemedicine and mHealth solutions. Patients with well-controlled NCDs received remote health services through phone consultations, and volunteers delivered medications to their homes. Mental health hotlines were established, and self-management support and healthy lifestyle promotion were provided through mass and social media platforms. Two rapid assessments were conducted to evaluate the interventions' effectiveness, leading to improvements in healthcare service delivery. Telemedicine consultations were integrated into the main healthcare information system, SOPs were developed for NCD and psychiatric services, and efforts were made to enhance self-management and collaboration with pharmacies. Oman is investing in technology for patient self-management, expanding telemedicine and digital health services, and providing educational and training platforms for healthcare providers.

## **Qatar**

The Ministry of Public Health in Qatar responded to the mental health challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic by establishing a tele-psychiatry helpline. This helpline categorized callers into specific groups and provided triage, psychological support and referrals to specialized services. Awareness campaigns were launched to reduce stigma and raise public awareness about mental health. The success of the helpline led to plans for its continuation beyond the pandemic. Digital health services were rapidly implemented to ensure care for individuals with noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and other health needs. These services included virtual video consultations, home delivery of medications, a self-assessment chatbot, virtual health services for labourers, and electronic systems for disease surveillance and vaccination registration. Qatar is expanding virtual consultations, enhancing the chatbot and planning to extend the electronic systems to the private sector.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Technology and mobile health (mHealth) have become essential in Saudi Arabia's response to

noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). NCDs account for a significant portion of deaths in the country, with cardiovascular diseases being a major concern. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted NCD services, prompting the Ministry of Health to turn to technology and mHealth solutions. Telephone hotlines, including the 937 service center, provided remote consultations and expanded their services to include WhatsApp consultations. Several smartphone applications were introduced: Seha for medical consultations and COVID-19 inquiries, Sehhaty for tele-consultations, appointments, prescriptions and monitoring, Wasfaty for pharmacy connections, Mawid for appointment booking, Tabaud for contact tracing and Twakkalna for electronic movement permits. Social media platforms were used for virtual health services and consultations, and a health volunteering platform recruited and trained volunteers. Saudi Arabia plans to maintain and enhance these digital health implementations for the future.

## **Sudan**

To address the disruption in healthcare services caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Sudan, telemedicine was implemented to support people living with noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). NCDs accounted for a significant number of deaths in Sudan, but the closure of health centers and diversion of services towards COVID-19 response hindered access to NCD care. The Federal Ministry of Health collaborated with the WHO Sudan Country Office to establish a telemedicine hotline accessible to NCD patients throughout the country. The hotline provided virtual consultations, triaging, prescriptions, counselling and referrals. Training was provided to healthcare providers on telemedicine modalities and NCD management during the pandemic. The success of the initiative relied on partnerships and involvement from regulatory authorities, telecommunication operators and medical societies. Family physicians were recruited to provide telemedicine services, supported by volunteer specialists. Sudan aims to sustain and expand telemedicine services, recognizing their potential to transform healthcare delivery in the country.

## **United Arab Emirates**

To address the challenge of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the COVID-19 pandemic, telemedicine and mHealth services were implemented. NCDs were the leading causes of death and disability in UAE and the pandemic posed challenges to the continuity of NCD care. The Ministry of Health and Prevention launched various initiatives, including e-visit services, a smoking cessation platform, mental health hotlines and a pre-diabetes consultation app. Supply chains for essential NCD medications were prioritized, ensuring access and safe delivery to patients' homes. Health awareness messaging was disseminated through social media, emphasizing self-management, seeking timely care and promoting mental well-being. Capacity building for healthcare professionals was conducted through virtual learning platforms. The implementation of telemedicine and mHealth services proved successful, with high utilization rates and satisfaction among users. UAE plans to expand these services to encompass all essential healthcare and develop user-friendly modalities, while also establishing policy frameworks for telemedicine and digital health regulation.

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