



Rural and Remote Healthcare

Proposed by [KMSA-Korea and IFMSA RC Asia-Pacific],

Summary

Rural healthcare, defined as healthcare services for residents in rural and remote areas, is essential to improve accessibility to health. As medical technologies and health consciousness have advanced, strategies to overcome the difficult circumstances imposed by remote living conditions have developed. Telemedicine and mobile health are two such strategies that are being increasingly employed with good measure.

Introduction

Currently there are still insufficient healthcare services by skilled professionals in many rural and remote areas of the world [1, 3], and the health disparities between residents in urban and rural areas have not been significantly narrowed despite our best efforts to date [2, 3]. These important issues are highlighted in the World Health Organization's (WHO) report, "Increasing access to health workers in remote and rural areas through improved retention" [3].

Rural and remote communities require improved access to appropriate and comprehensive healthcare provided by skilled and well-supported healthcare professionals. Collaborative health service planning and policy development are necessary steps to improve the status quo, and these must be conducted with transparency and accountability [4]. Under the umbrella of the aforementioned steps are several strategies which are being implemented to facilitate access to healthcare for rural and remote populations - telemedicine and mobile health are two of these.

Telemedicine is defined by the WHO as:

"The delivery of health care services, where distance is a critical factor, by all health care professionals using information and communication technologies for the exchange of valid information for diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease and injuries, research and evaluation, and for the continuing education of health care providers" [5].

Mobile health, or m-health, is defined as:

"The use of mobile phones and other wireless communication devices for healthcare services" [6].

The development of e-health (including telemedicine and mobile health) has the potential to lead to improved healthcare access and quality of care for many people in rural and remote areas. This has been evidenced by numerous peer-reviewed journal articles, including one showing that teleconsultations have successfully been used to provide diagnostic, treatment and management options for US military personnel in remote locations across the world [7]; and another revealing the large-scale cost-effectiveness of telemedicine in India [8]. With regards to mobile health, the results are similarly encouraging [9, 10].

In conclusion, telemedicine and mobile health are strategies which overcome geographical barriers. These new patient care technologies are increasingly being used to reduce health inequities by facilitating access to medical services in remote and under-resourced areas of the world.



Main text

The International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) strongly supports improved access to rural and remote healthcare, particularly through telemedicine and mobile health strategies. It calls upon organizational and national leaders, healthcare professionals, medical students and general activists to:

- 1) Establish a clear-cut definition of rural and remote healthcare.
- 2) Contribute to medical education efforts surrounding the need for improved rural and remote healthcare.
- 3) Promote innovative medical technologies such as telemedicine and mobile health technologies.
- 4) Establish guidelines in order to clarify conditions where it is necessary to introduce telemedicine and mobile health strategies for improved access to healthcare.
- 5) Contribute to the provision of healthcare services in remote areas.
- 6) Promote and facilitate the implementation of policy that supports rural healthcare reform.
- 7) Encourage multidisciplinary, collaborative health service planning for rural areas.

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