



86. Telemedicine

Published in January 2007

Background

The rapid development of information technology that has occurred in the last decades has led to a significant change in the traditional professional relationship between the physician and the patient. What began many years ago as a simple phone reply to the patient's request, and later became a reply sent by fax, has now reached the impressive capability of transmitting digitally, in real time, very complex bio-medical information of all kinds. There is no longer a need to visit the physician in order to receive his opinion regarding the results of some test or another and to hear his instructions for continuation of the treatment.

The new technologies currently permit physicians to remotely acquire complex and vital medical information and to meet the medical needs of their patients, without the latter being obliged to spend valuable time in a meeting with the physician. The rapid exchange of medical information permits the patient to remain in his natural surroundings, while taking a larger and more responsible part for the management of his health. Without doubt, the use of telemedicine will increase and we must prepare ourselves for it.

Apart from the technological problems, related to the quality and reliability of the medical information, its methods of transmission and security, new ethical problems arise that are unique to the mutual relations, digital in nature, between a physician and a patient who are not situated in the same room and do not see each other. In these few lines it is impossible to address all the ethical issues related to the digital management of telemedicine. This position paper is consequently intended to present the major features and arouse broader discussion and additional thought amongst physicians, health care organizations, and the general public.

Position paper

- The development of information technology currently permits a remote professional connection between a physician and a patient.
- Despite its advantages, telemedicine creates a new ethical and legal reality, and changes the traditional medical connection based on a personal meeting between the physician and the patient.
- Informed use of telemedicine may improve the professional connection with the patient and the treatment given to him.
- There is a need for both the physician and the patient to identify one another with full certainty when a remote professional connection is established between them.
- Professional responsibility is imposed on the physician for the quality of the



treatment in telemedicine, and consequently he must consider whether the medical issue in question is suitable for such a connection, and if he possesses information that permits him to give a proper professional answer.

- In cases in which a physical examination of the patient or a direct impression of his mental condition is required, the physician will not make use of telemedicine.
- Telemedicine shall be conducted in accordance with all the laws and ethical rules of conventional medicine.
- Telemedicine should be employed only under technical conditions permitting the preservation of medical confidentiality, security of the medical information, and its documentation.