
Media Statement

GUIDELINES ON TELEMEDICINE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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For immediate release

Pretoria - The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) has noted that there are numerous advertisements for doctors to be involved in Telemedicine models that are in contravention of the HPCSA's Ethical Guidelines on Telemedicine. This may result with patients routinely being serviced by practitioners virtually, that is, directly without the consulting and responsible practitioner's physical presence.

Telemedicine refers to the practice of medicine using electronic communications, information technology or other electronic means between a healthcare practitioner in one location and a healthcare practitioner in another location for the purpose of facilitating, improving and enhancing clinical, educational and scientific healthcare and research.

Telemedicine in South Africa is required to be in line with applicable legislation, in particular the National Health Act No. 61 of 2003 (as amended). The National Department of Health's e-Health Strategy South Africa (2012 – 2016) specifically refers to Telemedicine as “a tool that could bridge the gap between rural health and specialist services”.

Healthcare practitioners registered with the HPCSA who provide Telemedicine are required to do so in line with the provisions of the Health Professions Council Act No. 56 of 1974 (as amended). The HPCSA does not regard Telemedicine as a replacement for normal “face-to-face” healthcare but an add-on meant to enhance access to healthcare for South Africans who are disadvantaged and outside of the health services reach, such as specialists.

The HPCSA calls upon registered healthcare practitioners providing Telemedicine to do so in line with applicable legislation and guidance provided in the HPCSA's General Ethical Guidelines for good practice in Telemedicine (Booklet 10). The guidelines refer (but not limited) to the following when practising Telemedicine:

1. Healthcare practitioners' conduct should be ethical and professional at all times, even when dealing with patients remotely;
2. Both the consulting and servicing healthcare practitioners must be registered either with the HPCSA if the practice is in South Africa or an equivalent regulatory body in the country where the servicing healthcare practitioner is based (if outside South Africa);
3. Formal (preferably written) consent for among other things, specific services, including diagnosis and prescriptions and Information Communication Technology equipment to be used must always be secured from the patient;
4. Confidentiality for the patient and all information generated during procedures must always be respected;
5. The consulting practitioner remains responsible for the treatment, decisions and other recommendations given to the patient;
6. Routine and standard healthcare procedures, especially face-to-face consultation, physical examination and taking history from patients must be adhered to. Treatment, including issuing a prescription based solely on questionnaires or similar non-personal methods does not constitute an acceptable standard of care and;
7. All records generated during the service about the patient and participating healthcare practitioners must be stored, using routine procedures and systems.

Telemedicine should be utilised within the HPCSA ethical guidelines to ensure that healthcare practitioners facilitate, improve and enhance clinical, educational and scientific healthcare and research, particularly to patients from under serviced areas.

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About the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA)

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) also known as Council is a statutory body established under the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974. The HPCSA is committed to protecting the public and guiding the professions. The mission of the HPCSA is quality and equitable healthcare for all.

The HPCSA is mandated to regulate the health professions in the country in aspects pertaining to education, training and registration, professional conduct and ethical behaviour, ensuring Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and fostering compliance with healthcare standards.

In order to safeguard the public and guiding the professions, registration in terms of the Act is a prerequisite for practising any of the health professions registrable with Council.

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