

Source: The Straits Times, Page B2
Date: 16 December 2020

Patients with chronic illnesses more open to telemonitoring: SingHealth

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Patients with chronic health conditions such as diabetes have shown increased willingness to take up telemonitoring, a trend which is needed to help curb rising morbidity and mortality in Singapore's ageing population.

However, its feasibility depends on the patients' pro-activeness and their acceptance of communication technologies for healthcare services, said SingHealth Polyclinics yesterday, which is currently recruiting more than 150 hypertension patients to test its effectiveness.

Telemonitoring involves remote monitoring of vital parameters of a patient, such as blood pressure or blood sugar levels, outside the healthcare setting.

SingHealth said it enables care providers to take prompt measures to prevent complications that develop in between visits, which may go unnoticed for patients who rely solely on physical consultations for chronic diseases.

Associate Professor Tan Ngiap Chuan, director of research at SingHealth Polyclinics, noted that telemonitoring has had benefits

amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"This model of care has brought convenience to many of our patients, especially during the Covid-19 period when we are advised to stay home," said Prof Tan, who is also vice-chairman of research at the SingHealth-Duke NUS Family Medicine Academic Clinical Programme.

He said that with government agencies launching technology literacy programmes, such as the Smart Nation Singapore initiative, more patients could accept and adopt communication devices to manage their health.

To demonstrate the uptick in telemonitoring, SingHealth cited two studies it previously conducted.

While research in 2009 showed that only 40 per cent of patients were receptive to it, a 2017 study it conducted with the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine demonstrated that more than 52 per cent of patients had "positive perception and attitude" towards telemonitoring.

The 2017 study involved 900 multi-ethnic Asian patients, between the ages of 21 and 70, who were assessed at Pasir Ris and Sengkang polyclinics. They had chronic conditions such as Type 2 diabetes

mellitus and hypertension.

The patients' willingness to adopt telemonitoring depended on their perception towards their medical conditions, technological literacy and understanding of telemonitoring care, said SingHealth, which has eight polyclinics islandwide and has recorded more than 700,000 patient visits for hypertension and Type 2 diabetes mellitus.

Dr David Sin, who will be joining the SingHealth Family Medicine Residency next July, noted that patients without any need for financial assistance were more willing to use telemonitoring.

Dr Sin, currently a medical officer with the Singapore Armed Forces, said: "In contrast, patients who set aside more time for polyclinic visits, and those who had concerns regarding privacy violations were less willing to embark on this care model."

To further test the effectiveness of telemonitoring on maintaining a patient's health, a pilot programme for hypertension patients – called the Primary Tech-Enhanced Care at Bedok Polyclinic – was launched on Sept 30.

It has recruited close to 60 patients to date.

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