

Is telemedicine on the decline?

Electronic data management has been used extensively in our health care sector for a few years now. Nowadays, patient records and laboratory test and imaging results are electronic documents that can be easily transferred where they are needed using information networks.

Telemedicine applications started to gain any more popularity around the same time as electronic patient records. Here, the term telemedicine is used in its narrow meaning to refer to examining and treating the patient irrespective of physical distance. The form of telemedicine used here is televideoconsultation in which the patient is physically at the office of a health centre physician, who is consulting a specialist. According to a recent study, half of hospital districts would offer televideoconsultation and a fifth of the public health centres would be willing to use it. The situation has not changed since 2007.

This would suggest that the diffusion of televideoconsultation is slowing down, despite the fact that numerous domestic and international studies have shown that it could both substitute visits to specialised services and be very cost-effective. The patients have been very satisfied with the consultations. They have felt that the consultation is equivalent to a visit to the clinic and reduces the strain and costs of travelling back and forth.

Others have taken notice of this development as well. Freddy Lykke (CSC Scandihealth A/S), for instance, poses the question in his article in the EU eHealth News portal: "Has telemedicine reached its tipping point?" Lykke states that telemedicine still only encompasses a small part of the operation of the health care sector. The technology has been clumsy, and cultural and organisational factors and a lack of interest have undoubtedly affected this development as well. Other significant factors include the exclusion of televideoconsultation costs from the social security compensation system and the failure to develop the use of televideo technology further.

However, the demand for telemedicine continues to exist. The ageing of the population means that the demand of health services will increase. The service production is focusing more and more on outpatient care, i.e., the field of telemedicine. The development of cellular phones, computers and wireless information networks allow one to send real-time image and sound at any time, anywhere. They allow people to do their shopping, taxes and banking comfortably from their own home. Why couldn't health care be taken care of in the same way? The technology exists, but its use is hampered by our attitudes and inflexible organisational structures. However, I believe that the demand will soon break these barriers.

Ilkka Winblad
Editor-in-Chief