

A TELEDERMATOLOGY NETWORK FOR UNDERSERVED AREAS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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South Africa has long suffered from a huge burden of disease and limited resources to deal with it. In the 1980's, the AIDS pandemic brought a bewildering twist to overburdened health care providers. Skin disease in this country, already a cause of significant morbidity and mortality before HIV/AIDS, has become more prevalent, complex, and stigmatizing now in the HIV era.

In contrast to widely available specialty care in the North America, the UK and Europe, medical care from specialists, including dermatologists, in sub-Saharan Africa is scarce. Within the public sector of health care in South Africa, the system that serves the majority of patients in this country, there is on average one dermatologist serving 3-4 million people. When a basic health provider needs help with a skin-diseased patient whom he or she is seeing, referral to a dermatologist is often impossible to deliver to that patient, owing to distance and lack of funds to travel. How can consultation for dermatological care be delivered to South African health care providers and their patients by an alternative means?

Telemedicine is the delivery of health care across a distance. The application of telemedicine is especially useful in the visually oriented specialties, particularly dermatology. Tele dermatology has been utilized in recent years in underserved areas of South Africa.

This paper will describe an ongoing teledermatology system that aims to enhance delivery of dermatological care in relatively underserved areas of South Africa.

The specific objectives of this paper are to:

1. Describe the two year experience of an ongoing store-and-forward teledermatology system currently in operation in South Africa.
2. Describe the experiences of a referral nurse specialist to the teledermatology network.
3. Describe the challenges and potential advantages of this system.

Keywords: Teledermatology, Store-and-forward, HIV/AIDS