

ONLINE CONSULTATIONS FOR HIV/AIDS CARE IN RESOURCE-LIMITED SETTINGS

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Thanks to global initiatives and national efforts more than 1 million people infected with HIV are now treated with antiretrovirals in middle- and low-income countries. However, it is an enormous challenge to introduce antiretroviral therapy (ART) in a safe and effective way in developing countries. The Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp is specialized in training, research and assistance in tropical medicine and health care in developing countries. In 2003 we set up a hybrid web/e-mail discussion forum which/that is accessible on a medical Web site (<http://telemedicine.itg.be>), to support and guide physicians working in resource-limited settings in the medical decision-making and management of difficult HIV/AIDS cases.

We examined all data stored in our Telemedicine database and reviewed the information from the period April 2003-March 2006. During 3 years of activity the Telemedicine system received 491 questions from 31 different countries. Of the total queries, 47% (n = 230) were related to general use of antiretrovirals, side effects, second line regimens, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, immune reconstitution syndrome, TB/HIV and management of other co-infections during ART; 40% (n = 197) were related to the diagnosis and treatment of specific opportunistic infections (OIs) and 13% (n = 64) to general topics as organization of health services for AIDS care, TB DOTS, vaccination programs and guidelines delivery. Over the 3 years of Telemedicine we noticed a significant increase in the proportion of questions related to organizational issues of HIV programs, from 7.7% during the first year to 26.9% during the last year, (p-value < 0.001). The opposite was observed for questions on general use of antiretrovirals (from 14.2 to 4.7%), management of side effects (from 12% to 4.7%) and management of specific opportunistic infections (from 44.3% to 30.2%), (p-values < 0.05).

Scaling up HIV treatment and care in developing countries remains a difficult task. E-mail and internet are increasingly available in the developing world. This allows clinicians in developing countries to ask advice to specialists and mentors over great distances. Analyzing the data from our Telemedicine consultations we noticed a clear decrease of questions on general use and side effects of antiretrovirals while we observed a significant increase of questions concerning organizational issues of ART programs.

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