

## TELEMEDICINE SURVEY ON USERS' SATISFACTION

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We hereby present the results of a users' satisfaction survey done by the Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp (ITMA) to evaluate the clinicians' perception of the ITMA Telemedicine service. The specific objective of this Telemedicine project is to facilitate the introduction of high-quality antiretroviral therapy (ART) and the management of opportunistic infections in HIV/AIDS patients, through remote consultations, delivered to physicians working in low resource settings. This program started in 2003 and during the first 3 years of activity ITMA Telemedicine offered almost 500 teleconsultations to 31 mainly resource constrained countries.

Patient histories, laboratory findings, x-rays, and other components of the medical record are sent to ITMA Telemedicine through a web- or e-mail-based format (<http://telemedicine.itg.be>), seeking for a second opinion, which is then discussed by a network of HIV/AIDS specialists.

In July 2006 a standardized questionnaire has been sent to the 205 members of the Telemedicine discussion forum in order to assess the clinicians' perception of this service. The members were divided in "active users", participating in the discussion forum, and "passive users" (clinicians who consulted the telemedicine forum but did not post clinical cases and/or questions on the forum). The response rate was 53% among "active users" (18/34). They all judged that the service influenced the management of the patients, and 67% perceived that the advice was useful in more than 75% of the cases. The service was beneficial for the establishment of the diagnosis (78% of the cases), for the referring clinician's education (55%) and reassurance (39%).

The response rate in the "passive users" group was only 12%. The main reason to subscribe to the discussion forum for "passive users" was to learn from others' experience (50%) and to be aware of other ways to manage patients (44%).

This users' satisfaction evaluation was conceived as a part of a continuous assessment of this first ITMA Telemedicine initiative. Despite the low response rate, the overall perception and acceptability of this service seems encouraging in terms of feasibility. Nevertheless the way how to assess the effectiveness of such kind of service on health outcome remains difficult.

Keywords: telemedicine, evaluation, benefit, HIV/AIDS, remote consultations, developing countries