

FEATURE: HEALTHCARE

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Personalised healthcare could be in the hands of any employed South African with a cell phone running WhatsApp.



References and further reading

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Unlocking the power of telehealth in SA

A looming nursing shortage will affect the provision of healthcare across the board, with the likely side effect of driving medical costs even higher in South Africa – unless we find new ways of making the most of the resources we have.

Employers, who care about their people, naturally want to provide access to healthcare benefits that will have the greatest impact to help keep staff healthy and productive. Only 27% of South Africans have access to private healthcare, while the majority, some 71%, are reliant on overburdened public health services. The cost of providing full medical scheme membership to everyone is increasingly placing private health cover out of reach for many organisations, large and small.

Access to healthcare

This need not be an impossible situation; advisers can offer an affordable solution to corporate clients, by providing access to private healthcare as a standard employee benefit. Technology, nursing and coordination of quality healthcare are coming together to revolutionise the way people interact with healthcare for the better.

Nurses have long played the role of working closely with both doctors and patients and comprise 80% of the major primary healthcare professionals in the country, assessing needs and enabling efficient provision of healthcare, to enable more individual attention for each patient. SA's 2030 Human Resources for Health Strategy anticipates a shortage of 34 000 registered nurses by 2025, and points to disparities in health professionals per 10 000 population between rural and urban areas, and between the public and private sectors.

Telehealth, a tool to bridge the gap

According to ICASA's most recent State of the ITC Sector Report, by the end of 2021, 97% of South Africans had access to 4G/LTE coverage. Even before COVID-19, the National Department of Health, in its e-health Strategy (2012 – 2016) considered telehealth "a tool that could bridge the gap between rural health and specialist services".

This creates the potential for telenursing to bring home calls to the sick and elderly,

connecting them with doctors when needed, quickly and affordably – even in the most remote rural areas. WhatsApp has recorded more than 23 million users, and as South Africa's most popular social platform used by nine out of ten internet users, it is entrenched as the chosen platform most used to communicate.

Nurses are the ideal gatekeepers of healthcare coordination, making the most of investment in health by refining the provision of services to exactly where they are needed for greatest effect. In many cases telephone health or mental health counselling with a nurse can either resolve the concern or connect the person with primary healthcare or other resources appropriate to their individual medical condition.

Personalised healthcare could be in the hands of any employed South African with a cell phone running WhatsApp. Convenience encourages seeking health advice early, often avoiding health deteriorating and hospitalisation, and minimising time off work to recuperate or queue at public health facilities.

If employees feel unwell, they can contact a nurse immediately on WhatsApp. From there, they will set up a doctor's appointment if needed, ensuring employees have access to medication, blood tests, x-rays, dentistry, optometry and so on, to effectively provide for day-to-day healthcare concerns that need not break the bank for employers.

Technology-driven solutions

An innovative model such as this – the likes of which is already available locally through BeWell, an employer-funded telemedicine empowered health plan designed and distributed in partnership with Standard Bank to support employees' primary healthcare needs – maximises the reach of healthcare skills and resources in South Africa. What's more, it is the lowest cost funding mechanism for the provision of primary healthcare available, with additional benefits based on need.

With technology-driven solutions such as these, there is greater scope to improve the experience and outcomes of healthcare through making it more convenient, more accessible, and much less expensive. •