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Review Article

Impact of Telemedicine on Patient Care in India

Pankaj Kumar^{1*}, Parul Gautam²

¹Assistant Professor, Rajarshi Rananjay Singh College of Pharmacy, Amethi, U.P., India-227405

²Project Associate II, CSIR-National Botanical Research Institute, Rana Pratap Marg, Lucknow - 226001

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ABSTRACT

Telemedicine has transformed healthcare delivery in India, addressing challenges of accessibility, cost, and quality in a diverse and densely populated nation. This review examines telemedicine's impact on patient care, focusing on its role in enhancing access, improving health outcomes, reducing costs, and overcoming barriers in India. Drawing from peer-reviewed studies and practitioner insights, the article highlights applications in chronic disease management, mental health, maternal care, and infectious diseases, with examples like eSanjeevani and SCARF telepsychiatry programs. Benefits include reduced travel costs, improved care continuity, and increased access for rural populations. However, challenges such as digital literacy, internet connectivity, and regulatory gaps persist. Practitioner opinions underscore telemedicine's potential to reduce COVID-19 risks and streamline workflows, though concerns about legal liabilities and diagnostic accuracy remain. The review advocates for policy reforms, infrastructure improvements, and culturally tailored solutions to ensure equitable telemedicine access. Future research should focus on cost-effectiveness and long-term outcomes to strengthen telemedicine's role in India's healthcare system.

INTRODUCTION

India, with its population of over 1.4 billion people, represents one of the most complex healthcare ecosystems in the world. The nation's vast geographical diversity, coupled with disparities in infrastructure, creates a persistent challenge in delivering equitable, accessible, and high-quality medical care. Approximately 65% of India's population resides in rural areas, where healthcare facilities are sparse, poorly equipped, and often staffed with limited medical professionals. In contrast, urban centers, though equipped with advanced hospitals and specialty services, are frequently overwhelmed by excessive patient loads, long waiting times, and rising treatment costs (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare,

2020). This uneven distribution of resources underscores the urgent need for innovative strategies to bridge the rural-urban divide in healthcare access.

Against this backdrop, telemedicine has emerged as a transformative approach to healthcare delivery in India. Broadly defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to deliver clinical services remotely, telemedicine extends the reach of healthcare professionals beyond geographical boundaries. By enabling patients to consult physicians virtually, share diagnostic information, and receive treatment guidance without physically visiting healthcare facilities, telemedicine addresses critical barriers of distance, cost, and time. Its importance was dramatically highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional

***Corresponding Author:** Pankaj Kumar

Address: Assistant Professor, Rajarshi Rananjay Singh College of Pharmacy, Amethi, U.P., India-227405

Email ✉: pankajpandey25695@gmail.com

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healthcare delivery systems were severely disrupted. During this period, telemedicine adoption surged, with the Government of India's national platform, eSanjeevani, recording over 12 million consultations by 2021, marking a milestone in digital health adoption.

The significance of telemedicine in India goes beyond pandemic management. It has shown promise in areas such as chronic disease management, mental health services, maternal and child health, dermatology, and diabetes care, where routine follow-ups and remote monitoring can significantly improve health outcomes. A notable example is the Chunampet Rural Diabetes Prevention Initiative, which successfully leveraged teleconsultations and community-based interventions to deliver specialized care in underserved populations. Furthermore, the rise of private telemedicine platforms such as Practo, mFine, and 1mg has expanded access to affordable and timely consultations, offering patients greater flexibility and choice.

Despite these advances, the implementation of telemedicine in India is not without challenges. Issues such as digital literacy, inadequate internet penetration in certain regions, medico-legal uncertainties, and concerns about data privacy remain major obstacles to widespread adoption. Additionally, skepticism among both patients and healthcare providers about the effectiveness and reliability of virtual consultations poses barriers to acceptance. Nevertheless, the Telemedicine Practice Guidelines of 2020, issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Medical Council of India, have provided regulatory clarity, helping to legitimize and standardize telemedicine practices nationwide.

This review article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of telemedicine on patient care in India, with particular emphasis on

- Accessibility: How telemedicine improves healthcare access for rural and underserved populations.
- Health outcomes: Evidence of improved diagnosis, treatment adherence, and patient satisfaction.
- Cost-effectiveness: Reduction in travel, hospitalization, and consultation expenses.
- Barriers and challenges: Technological, legal, and social factors hindering adoption.
- Practitioner perspectives: Insights into physician acceptance, workflow integration, and training needs.

METHODOLOGY

This review synthesizes peer-reviewed literature from PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, focusing on telemedicine's impact in India from 2015 to 2025. Inclusion criteria comprised English-language, peer-reviewed studies with empirical data. Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed sources and studies lacking Indian context. A total of forty-eight studies were analyzed, supplemented by practitioner opinions from

recent surveys. Data were extracted on telemedicine applications, outcomes, barriers, and practitioner perspectives, categorized thematically.

TELEMEDICINE'S IMPACT ON PATIENT CARE IN INDIA

Enhancing Healthcare Accessibility

Telemedicine has significantly improved healthcare access in India, particularly for rural and underserved populations. India's rural healthcare infrastructure is limited, with only 30% of doctors serving rural areas despite the majority of the population residing there (Gupta et al., 2020). Telemedicine overcomes geographical barriers by enabling remote consultations via video, phone, or store-and-forward systems. For instance, the eSanjeevani platform, launched by the Indian government, provides free teleconsultations, serving nearly 90,000 patients daily by 2021. This platform connects rural patients with specialists in urban hubs, reducing travel burdens (Figure 1 a,b).

The Chunampet Rural Diabetes Prevention Initiative in Tamil Nadu uses telemedicine for diabetes screening and management, enabling rural patients to access endocrinologists remotely (Mishra et al., 2021). Similarly, the LearnTB program has improved tuberculosis diagnosis by facilitating remote consultations with pulmonologists, enhancing timely treatment in remote areas (Kumar et al., 2020). These initiatives have reduced travel costs and time, critical for patients in remote regions like Jharkhand, where telemedicine helped a patient access urgent care.

Practitioner Opinion

A 2024 survey of Indian doctors found 93% recognized telemedicine's ability to reduce COVID-19 infection risks for healthcare professionals, highlighting its role in ensuring safe access during pandemics (Jain et al., 2024).

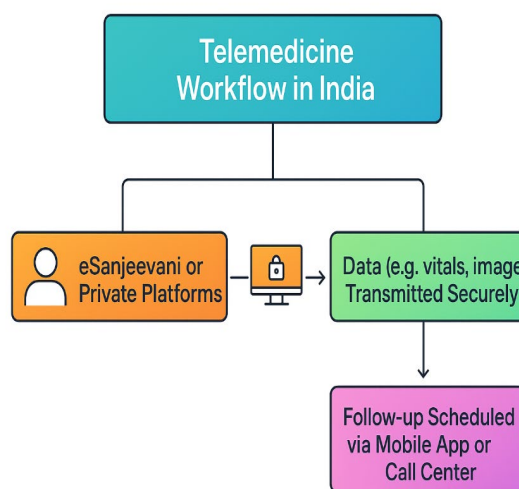


Figure 1(a): Telemedicine Workflow in India

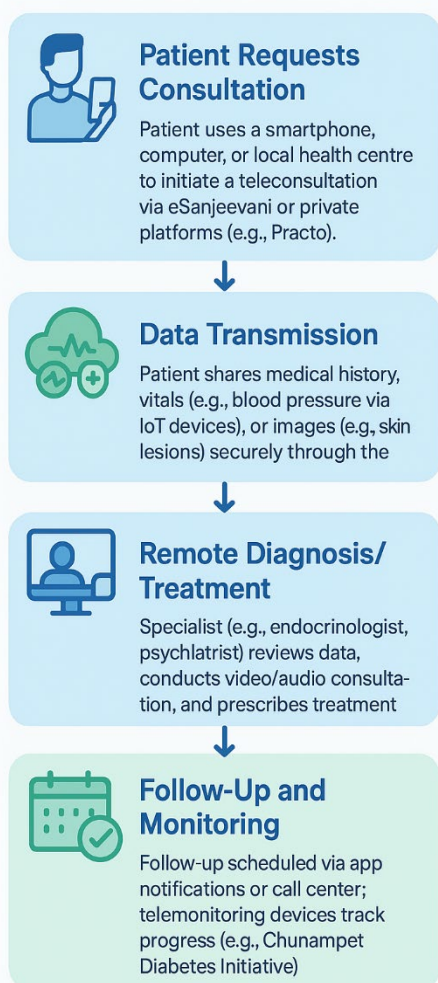


Figure 1(b): Telemedicine Workflow in India

Dr. Rani, a general physician, noted, “Telemedicine allows us to reach patients in remote villages, saving them days of travel and lost wages.”

Improving Health Outcomes

Telemedicine has shown promising outcomes in India across various specialties. In chronic disease management, telemonitoring has improved adherence and outcomes for conditions like diabetes and hypertension. The Chunampet initiative reported a 15% reduction in HbA1c levels among diabetic patients using teleconsultations (Anjana et al., 2020). Telepsychiatry programs, such as the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), have expanded mental health access in rural areas, with studies showing comparable outcomes to in-person therapy for depression and anxiety (Thara et al., 2020). In infectious diseases, telemedicine has enhanced HIV and tuberculosis care. The LearnTB program facilitated early diagnosis and treatment, reducing disease progression (Kumar et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, teleconsultations ensured continuity of care for non-

COVID patients, reducing hospital visits by 67% between March and May 2020. In maternal health, telemedicine has supported prenatal care, with virtual visits improving patient satisfaction among average-risk pregnancies.

Practitioner Opinion

Dr. Kabra, a pediatrician, stated, “Telemedicine follow-ups for children with respiratory illnesses have reduced hospital readmissions by ensuring timely interventions” (Kumari et al., 2021). However, some practitioners express concerns about diagnostic accuracy without physical examinations, emphasizing the need for hybrid models combining telemedicine with in-person care. Table 1 summarizes key telemedicine applications in India, highlighting their role in improving patient care across specialties.

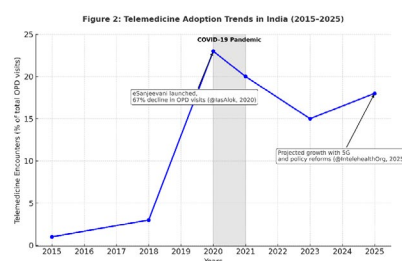
Cost-Effectiveness

Telemedicine offers significant cost savings in India, where healthcare expenses and travel costs burden low-income populations. By reducing in-person visits, telemedicine cuts transportation and wage-loss costs for rural patients (Harvey et al., 2018). A study by Flodgren et al. (2015) reported an 18% reduction in emergency department visits due to telemedicine, translating to lower healthcare costs. The eSanjeevani platform, being free, has made healthcare accessible to millions, with cost savings estimated at ₹500–1,000 per consultation for rural patients (Das et al., 2020).

However, initial setup costs for telemedicine infrastructure, including high-quality video systems and training, can be substantial for private providers (Bokolo, 2020). Limited insurance coverage for teleconsultations (45% of doctors cited this as a barrier) further complicates cost-effectiveness (Jain et al., 2024). Recent policy changes by Indian health insurers to include telemedicine reimbursements are promising but require further development (Kumar et al., 2020).

Practitioner Opinion

Dr. Kalra noted, “Telemedicine reduces patient costs significantly, but fragmented insurance policies limit its scalability. Reduced fees for teleconsultations could



Caption: This graph depicts the surge in telemedicine adoption in India, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and sustained by platforms like eSanjeevani, with projected growth through 2025 (Data sourced from glassdoor, 2020).

Figure 2: Telemedicine Adoption Trends in India (2015–2025)

Table 1: Key Telemedicine Applications in India

<i>Application</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Teleconsultation	Video/phone consultations for primary care and specialist access.	eSanjeevani platform for general physician consults.	Das et al. (2020)
Telemonitoring	Remote monitoring of chronic conditions using mobile apps/devices.	Chunampet Diabetes Initiative for blood glucose tracking.	Anjana et al. (2020)
Telepsychiatry	Mental health therapy via video conferencing.	SCARF program for rural mental health access.	Thara et al. (2020)
Teleophthalmology	Remote eye screenings for diabetic retinopathy.	Teleophthalmology in South India during COVID-19 lockdown.	Ravindran et al. (2021)
Telerheumatology	Remote consultations for arthritis patients.	Asian pilot study during COVID-19.	Sandhu et al. (2021)
Infectious Disease Care	Remote diagnosis/treatment of TB and HIV.	LearnTB for tuberculosis management.	Kumar et al. (2020)

incentivize adoption” (Mishra et al., 2021).

Barriers To Telemedicine Adoption In India

Telemedicine faces several barriers in India, particularly affecting vulnerable populations (Wure 2).

Digital literacy

is a major issue, with 70% of older adults lacking skills to use telemedicine platforms (Lam et al., 2020).

Internet connectivity

is another challenge, with India ranking 131st in mobile internet speed, hindering audiovisual consultations in rural areas (Elhence, 2023). Patients with lower socioeconomic status are less likely to complete virtual visits, exacerbating inequities (Losorelli et al., 2020).

Regulatory and legal concerns

also impede adoption. Many doctors express skepticism due to vague medical malpractice laws for telemedicine, fearing liability for unexamined patients. The absence of comprehensive digital health policies and fragmented regulations further complicates uniform deployment (Kumar et al., 2020).

Cultural barriers

including linguistic diversity (22 major languages) and patient preference for in-person visits, affect acceptability, particularly in rural areas (Gupta et al., 2020).

Practitioner Opinion

Dr. Sehrawat, a dermatologist, stated, “Poor internet and lack of patient trust in virtual diagnoses are major hurdles. We need local language support and better connectivity” (Bhargava & Sarkar, 2020).

Telemedicine In Specialized Care

Telemedicine has made significant strides in specialized care in India.

Teleophthalmology

has improved diabetic retinopathy screenings in South

India, with remote consultations reducing blindness risks (Ravindran et al., 2021).

Telerheumatology

has supported arthritis patients, with pilot studies showing high patient satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sandhu et al., 2021).

Telesurgery

a cutting-edge application, saw India’s first indigenously developed surgical robot used for a heart surgery conducted 2,000 km away, showcasing technological advancements.

Practitioner Opinion

Dr. Aghoram, a neurologist, noted, “Video teleconsultations for epilepsy patients have improved follow-up rates, but high-quality video systems are essential for accurate assessments” (Nair et al., 2021).

Future Directions And Policy Recommendations

To maximize telemedicine’s potential in India, several strategies are needed:

Infrastructure Investment

Improve rural internet connectivity and provide subsidized devices to bridge the digital divide (Elhence, 2023).

Regulatory Clarity

Standardize telemedicine laws to address malpractice concerns and ensure practitioner confidence.

Cultural Adaptation

Develop multilingual platforms and train local consultants to address linguistic diversity (Kumar et al., 2020).

Cost-Effectiveness Studies

Conduct robust research to validate telemedicine’s economic benefits across diseases (Gupta et al., 2020). The Tuber project in Gujarat exemplifies sustainable telemedicine, integrating community health workers with



teleconsultations to enhance rural access (Kumar et al., 2020). Scaling such models nationwide could transform India's healthcare landscape.

DISCUSSION

Telemedicine has revolutionized patient care in India, particularly through platforms like eSanjeevani and initiatives like SCARF and Chunampet, which address critical gaps in access and outcomes. Its cost-effectiveness and ability to reduce infection risks during pandemics are widely acknowledged by practitioners (Jain et al., 2024). However, barriers like digital literacy, connectivity, and regulatory ambiguity limit its reach, particularly for vulnerable groups (Lam et al., 2020). Practitioner concerns about legal liabilities highlight the need for clear policies. Future research should focus on long-term outcomes, cost-effectiveness, and equitable implementation to ensure telemedicine's transformative potential is realized across India's diverse population.

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