

TELEPHARMACY: A TOOL FOR EXPANDING ACCESS TO CARE IN NIGERIA

Pharm Akinsete Charles, FPSN
Clinical Pharmacist

Background

Telepharmacy—the delivery of pharmaceutical care through digital and telecommunication technologies—has emerged as a practical and transformative solution to Nigeria’s persistent healthcare access challenges.

In a country where large populations live in underserved and hard-to-reach areas, telepharmacy is increasingly bridging the gap between patients and essential pharmaceutical services.

THE NIGERIAN HEALTHCARE CONTEXT

Nigeria faces significant barriers to healthcare access, including:

- Shortage and uneven distribution of pharmacists
- Poor infrastructure in rural communities
- Long travel distances to health facilities
- High cost of accessing care

It is estimated that over 100 million Nigerians lack reliable access to primary healthcare, particularly in rural medical deserts.

Telepharmacy offers a scalable solution to these systemic challenges.

HOW TELEPHARMACY EXPANDS ACCESS IN NIGERIA.

1. Reaching Underserved and Rural Areas:

Telepharmacy enables patients in remote communities to consult licensed pharmacists without travelling long distances. It significantly reduces geographical barriers and improves equity in healthcare delivery.

2. Improving Medication Availability and Delivery:

Through hub-and-spoke models, centralized pharmacies can supply medicines to remote locations and even deliver directly to patients, ensuring timely access to essential drugs.

3. Enhancing Medication Adherence and Safety:

Digital platforms allow pharmacists to monitor patient medication use, provide counseling, and intervene when necessary—helping reduce errors and improve outcomes.

4. Supporting Chronic Disease Management:

Patients with conditions like hypertension or diabetes can receive continuous follow-up care, dosage adjustments, and education remotely.

5. Cost and Time Efficiency:

Telepharmacy reduces transportation costs, waiting time, and indirect expenses associated with hospital visits—making healthcare more affordable.

TELEPHARMACY IN PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Innovative models are already emerging, for example:

- Teleconsultations connecting patients to pharmacists.
- Digital prescription verification systems
- Mobile-based medication management platforms
- Community-based telepharmacy hubs

Some telepharmacy networks in Nigeria have already:

- ✓ Connected multiple rural communities
- ✓ Delivered thousands of medications
- ✓ Reduced travel distance for care significantly

CHALLENGES TO TELEPHARMACY IN NIGERIA

Despite its potential, several barriers remain

• Limited Infrastructure

Poor internet connectivity and unreliable power supply hinder digital health adoption.

• Regulatory Gaps

Nigeria currently lacks comprehensive laws specifically governing telepharmacy, although telemedicine is recognized under existing medical regulations.

• Low Awareness and Digital Literacy

Both patients and some healthcare providers may lack adequate knowledge of telepharmacy services.

- Financial and Operational Constraints

Challenges such as lack of software, funding, and incentives for pharmacists affect widespread implementation.

ACCEPTANCE AND FUTURE POTENTIAL

Encouragingly:

Over 70% of patients in a Nigerian study found telepharmacy acceptable.

More than 60% were willing to pay for such services (PubMed)

This indicates strong potential for growth, especially with:

Increased smartphone penetration

Government support for digital health

Public-private partnerships

THE WAY FORWARD

To fully harness telepharmacy in Nigeria, we will need to:

- Strengthen regulatory frameworks
- Invest in digital infrastructure
- Train pharmacists in digital health competencies
- Promote awareness among the public
- Integrate telepharmacy into primary healthcare systems

CONCLUSION

Telepharmacy is a powerful tool for expanding access to care in Nigeria.

By leveraging technology, it addresses critical gaps in healthcare delivery—bringing pharmaceutical care closer to millions of underserved Nigerians.

As adoption grows, telepharmacy has the potential to significantly advance Nigeria's journey toward universal health coverage, improving health outcomes and transforming the role of pharmacists in the digital age.

References:

World Health Organization (2010). Telemedicine: Opportunities and developments in Member States. Geneva: WHO Press.

World Health Organization (2019). WHO guideline: Recommendations on digital interventions for health system strengthening.

International Pharmaceutical Federation (2017). Digital Health in Pharmacy Education: Developing a digitally enabled pharmaceutical workforce.

Pharmacists Council of Nigeria (2020). Guidelines on the Practice of Pharmacy in Nigeria.

Federal Ministry of Health Nigeria (2020). National Digital Health Policy and Strategy (2020–2024).

National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (2021). Regulatory framework for drug distribution in Nigeria.

Oladimeji O. Oladipo et al. (2022). Patients' perception and willingness to use telepharmacy services in Nigeria.

National Bureau of Statistics (2023). Healthcare access and demographic statistics in Nigeria.

International Telecommunication Union (2022). Measuring digital development: Facts and figures.

African Union (2020). Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030).