**Telemedicine can expand universal access to care and improve patient experience**

**Johannesburg - Telemedicine is revolutionising healthcare worldwide, and South Africa is no exception. Telemedicine refers to the use of telecommunication technology to provide medical services remotely through virtual consultations, remote monitoring of patients, and digital transmission of medical information.**

Innovations like Medshield's SmartCare telemedicine ecosystem that provides medical scheme benefits for virtual telemedicine consultations have helped pave the way for telemedicine in South Africa. In addition, telemedicine has helped lighten the load of health professionals and improved patient care. As technology continues to evolve, the potential for telemedicine to expand universal access to care and improve patient experience in South Africa is immense.

**Several benefits and challenges**

The **benefits of telemedicine** are numerous and can significantly impact healthcare delivery in South Africa.

Telemedicine offers a significant advantage in reaching underserved and remote populations and can bridge the gap by allowing patients to consult with doctors without lengthy, costly journeys to urban centres. It also improves patient experience by offering flexible access to healthcare services. Patients can schedule virtual appointments, reducing waiting times and allowing them to manage chronic conditions more effectively.Ultimately, it has the potential to significantly reduce healthcare costs for patients and providers by minimising the need for physical infrastructure and reducing hospital readmissions through better disease management.

Medshield's SmartCare offering uses long-term partnerships with clinics and pharmacies to bring quality healthcare to its members in a convenient manner. As part of the medical aid benefits, members can visit a registered nurse in a convenient pharmacy clinic. The nurse will do an initial assessment based on the patient's needs, and if necessary, the nurse will call a GP for a virtual consultation and provide a script which members can fulfil at the pharmacy – truly a one-stop shop. Medshield allows members to access healthcare services through in-person, telephone, and virtual consultation benefits, which are accessible through a link on the Scheme's website.

Another innovation is Medshield's Hospital-at-Home service, delivered by Quro Medical, which offers safe alternatives to hospitals as the centres of patient care and management. It allows members to recuperate at home instead of a general hospital ward for a specified period without compromising the quality of care. The Quro Medical clinical team schedules regular home visits, daily or more frequently, to deliver the treatment and care required. For more information, please call Hospital Benefit Management on 086 000 2121.

Telemedicine restores trust in healthcare – as seen during the pandemic when virtual consultations reduced the chance of infection. When health professionals use telemedicine and digital relationships, they can still provide personalised care and treat people who might not have been able to access the care otherwise.

Still, **several challenges** must be addressed to fully realise its potential in South Africa.

Telemedicine adoption in South Africa faces challenges due to poor internet connectivity in rural areas. Despite urban areas having good broadband access, rural areas often struggle with poor or non-existent internet connections. To overcome this, investment in the proper infrastructure is crucial.

Furthermore, healthcare professionals need proper training and comfort with telemedicine technology to ensure its adoption. South African medical schools have integrated telemedicine training into their curricula to create a proficient workforce for remote care.

**Investing in telemedicine requires a strategic approach**

Telemedicine has the potential to revolutionise healthcare by enhancing access to care and reducing healthcare costs. However, it requires strategic investment in policy development, infrastructure improvement, and capacity building. Public-private partnerships can drive the growth of telemedicine by pooling resources and expertise, leading to more effective solutions.

Investment in innovative technologies, such as user-friendly platforms, remote monitoring devices, and secure data transmission systems, is crucial for advancing telemedicine. South African startups are leading in telemedicine innovation, developing mobile health apps, AI-powered diagnostic tools, and remote monitoring devices. Supporting and investing in these startups can foster a vibrant telemedicine ecosystem.

Capacity building and education are also essential for the successful implementation of telemedicine. Training programmes, workshops, and public awareness campaigns can help build healthcare providers' capacity and educate patients about telemedicine. A national telemedicine training programme was launched to equip healthcare workers with remote care skills, making many healthcare professionals proficient in telemedicine tools.

Telemedicine in South Africa has the potential to transform healthcare access and improve patient outcomes. By strategically investing in telemedicine, the country can achieve universal access to care, improve patient experience, make healthcare more cost-effective, and enhance health outcomes for chronic conditions. Telemedicine can reach underserved populations, provide timely, high-quality medical services, reduce health disparities, and offer convenient, flexible options. It can also reduce waiting times, improve specialist access, and provide personalised care. Telemedicine can enhance lives and reduce healthcare costs in the long term, making it a promising future for healthcare in South Africa.

**FIN**

(783 words)

**EDITORS NOTES**

**FURTHER MEDIA INFORMATION AND INTERVIEW REQUESTS**

* Stone issues this release on behalf of the Medshield Medical Scheme.
* For media enquiries or interview requests, please contact Willem Eksteen, CEO of Stone or a media liaison member of the Stone team at media@stone.consulting / 011 447 0168
* Alternatively, contact Lilané Swanepoel at Medshield at 010 597 4982 / lilanes@medshield.co.za

**MORE INFORMATION ON THE 2024 MEDSHIELD BENEFIT OPTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

Benefits and Contribution amendments are subject to CMS approval.

Please refer to the 2024 Product Page on the Medshield website at <https://medshield.co.za/>. You can review the benefit adjustments and value adds and download the 2024 benefit guides

* **PremiumPlus** provides mature families and professionals with unlimited hospital cover in a hospital of their choice, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at 200% Medshield Private Tariff, and the freedom to manage daily healthcare expenses through a comprehensive Personal Savings Account and extended Above Threshold Cover.
* **MediBonus** provides mature families and professionals with unlimited hospital cover in a hospital of their choice, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at 200% Medshield Private Tariff, and the independence to manage daily healthcare expenses through a substantial Day-to-Day Limit.
* **MediSaver** is perfect for independent individuals and young professionals thinking about expanding their families. MediSaver offers unlimited hospital cover in the Compact Hospital Network, with the freedom to manage daily healthcare expenses through a generous Personal Savings Account.
* **MediPlus** provides middle to upper-income families with complete healthcare cover for major medical and daily healthcare needs. Unlimited hospital cover is provided through a choice of two hospital networks, Prime or the value-focused Compact Hospital Network. Daily healthcare expenses are covered through a generous Day-to-Day Limit. Benefits are identical in both categories, Prime and Compact, with care coordination and doctor referral mandated on MediPlus Compact.
* **MediCore** is ideal for healthy individuals looking for comprehensive hospital cover, with daily healthcare expenses self-managed. This option offers unlimited hospital cover in the Compact Hospital Network, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at Medshield Private Tariff 200%. Day-to-day healthcare expenses are self-funded.
* **MediValue - Prime and Compact** - is the ideal option for growing families. It offers affordable cover for major medical and daily healthcare needs. Unlimited hospital cover is provided through a choice of two hospital networks, Prime or the value-focused Compact Hospital Network. Daily healthcare expenses are covered through a sizeable Day-to-Day Limit. Benefits are identical on both options, MediValue Prime and MediValue Compact, with care coordination and doctor referral mandated on MediValue Compact.
* **MediSwift** is the ideal hospital plan for active, healthy individuals. Major medical emergency and In-Hospital treatment are covered up to R1 million per family in the Compact Hospital Network, with the added benefit of day-to-day treatment for non-professional sports injuries. As a hospital plan, MediSwift offers no Day-to-Day benefits, allowing members the freedom to self-manage their daily healthcare expenses.

**Medshield Medical Scheme - Live Assured knowing you have a Partner for Life.**

**ABOUT MEDSHIELD MEDICAL SCHEME**

* Medshield is a healthcare fund where all members contribute towards the fund monthly to cater for medical cover should the need arise.
* Medshield has been in operation since 1968, making us one of the most experienced, knowledgeable, and reliable medical schemes in South Africa. Our extensive experience in the healthcare sector guides our understanding of our members' needs. Our excellent cover and benefits combined with the best quality systems and services have resulted in our exceptional size and strength.
* Each of our options offers affordably priced benefits. We continuously review and improve the range of benefits in each option to bring you what you need.
* Our impeccable reputation of prompt payments to hospitals, doctors, pharmacies and other medical caregivers guarantees approval from service providers when you present your Medshield membership card.
* Our extensive partner networks place us in the perfect position to offer exceptionally competitive rates to our members.
* Medshield is well-represented throughout all nine provinces and provides seamless access to service providers in your area. Our geographical spread provides convenience if it becomes necessary for you to have a personal discussion with one of our experienced consultants. We also have a streamlined online claim submission system and immediate contact centre assistance, making it easier to manage your membership and claims from the convenience of your home or office.
* Our extensive range of additional benefits and services is another distinguishing factor. Our benefits and services have been designed to give members additional support when they need it most, for instance, in an emergency or when suffering from a chronic or life-threatening condition.
* Compared with other medical schemes, our trustworthiness, impeccable history, and exceptional service guarantee that we come out tops!