Digital & Telehealth Manifesto: A Smart Solution for Health Equity and Systems Strengthening

The Smart Health Summit, held on the 1st and 2nd of June, brought together industry leaders and key stakeholders who share a common goal: *To improve health access, quality care and the health system as a whole*. The two-day conference fostered a common belief: *Digital health, underpinned by novel and improved technology, holds immense power and potential as a vehicle to achieve this common goal*.

The inaugural Smart Health Summit afforded stakeholders a platform to **engage, deliberate, problem-solve and develop a greater understanding** of the potential benefit of digital health.

This manifesto seeks to further this collaborative effort and continue to work together to realise the transformative potential of telehealth and digital health.

The promise of real-world telehealth solutions that were presented at the Summit inspired this commitment to move the digital health agenda forward – together.

Access to healthcare is a fundamental human right that is enshrined both in the Universal Declaration of Fundamental Human Rights and in our Constitution. A lack of resources, including a critical shortage of healthcare workers and direct access to quality healthcare facilities, is a severe obstacle in the way of realising this basic human right.

This is a historic and opportune moment. The profusion of digital health innovations, which continue to grow in number and in ingenuity, is giving us access to tools and solutions to mitigate many of these barriers to care and deliver long-term sustainable solutions. This can only be achieved with robust public and private sectors working together to deliver quality care to all the people of this country.

There are four key pillars that fall under the umbrella term **digital health**. Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data analytics, cyber security and telehealth all play an integral role in our ability to create and implement robust healthcare solutions. Digital health is the crucial avenue through which broader **equity in access to quality healthcare** can be achieved.

Healthcare workers can see more patients at lower costs with the support of appropriate technologies – enabling limited resources to stretch further. **Technology-based interventions** will benefit everyone but, notably, those in access-constrained settings will gain to the greatest extent.

Our ability to collect, share and **analyse data** will allow us to develop targeted solutions that optimise and limit the wasteful use of our limited resources. **Cyber security** is essential to protect this data as well as safeguard privacy and confidentiality. **AI** is a burgeoning field, full of innovative and revolutionary opportunities. We are only beginning to understand the extent to which AI may be able to reduce the cognitive load and administrative burden on healthcare workers so they have more time to spend on the **human elements of healthcare** which can never be supplanted by AI.

Digital health is an evolving field, and it will continue to advance, offering new solutions to old problems and to new challenges as they arise.

COVID-19 distinctly demonstrated the benefits of cross-sectoral collaboration embracing technology. It also proved that **barriers** to virtual care are surmountable when there is a collective will and when we break free from our silos in favour of a collaborative effort.

The barriers to the wider adoption of digital health solutions include:

- Fear of change: Patient and practitioner reluctance or a lack of confidence in adopting digital health solutions as revolutionary new modes of healthcare delivery.
- A lack of technological literacy or education to assist healthcare providers understand the risks and benefits of new innovations.
- Working in silos instead of collaborating, particularly between the public and private sectors, to innovate and implement solutions safely.
- A paucity of guidelines to regulate the industry to ensure patient safety and standards of quality care.
- Concerns over revenue streams for practitioners.
- Regulatory barriers and/ or uncertainty.
- Inadequate technological infrastructure.
- Understandable concerns around the security and privacy of data.

Based on these engagements, the Summit **recommends clear next steps** needed to turn this potential into a reality.

Recommendations:

1. Collaborate to develop a National Telehealth/Smarthealth Strategy: This should include the vision, goals and implementation timeline. It should cover all aspects of telehealth including electronic health records, health data interoperability and health information exchange systems.
2. Advocate for stakeholder inclusion in the development of the next National Digital Health Strategy, after the current strategy expires in 2024.
3. Create a space to continue knowledge sharing and collaborative action where all interested parties across the public and private continuum have a platform to be heard and to contribute to the digital health agenda. This platform should promote innovation.
4. Identify the infrastructural needs and the required investments for telehealth initiatives as well as for big data collection and analysis across the public and private sectors.
5. Improve data governance to ensure privacy, confidentiality and informed consent. Adopt internationally recognised standards to protect privacy, appropriately adapted to the South African environment.
6. Promote the importance of cyber security and provide guidance to healthcare providers on how to protect themselves and their patients from data breaches.
7. Promote interoperability and standards to govern it. Design and implement interoperability protocols to facilitate information sharing across systems and platforms.
8. Engage with regulators to establish regulatory frameworks that are flexible enough to adapt to innovative change while robust enough to ensure patient safety, quality care and other ethical considerations.
9. Create solutions to the current regulatory barriers that hinder data collection and sharing for health interventions and outcomes.
10. Address provider and patient concerns about the role and risk of AI.
11. Invest in digital health education and workforce development. Identify the needed training and subsequent design and development of programmes improving digital literacy and ensuring the necessary skills exist to effectively deliver digital health services.

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