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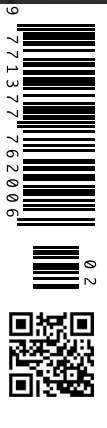
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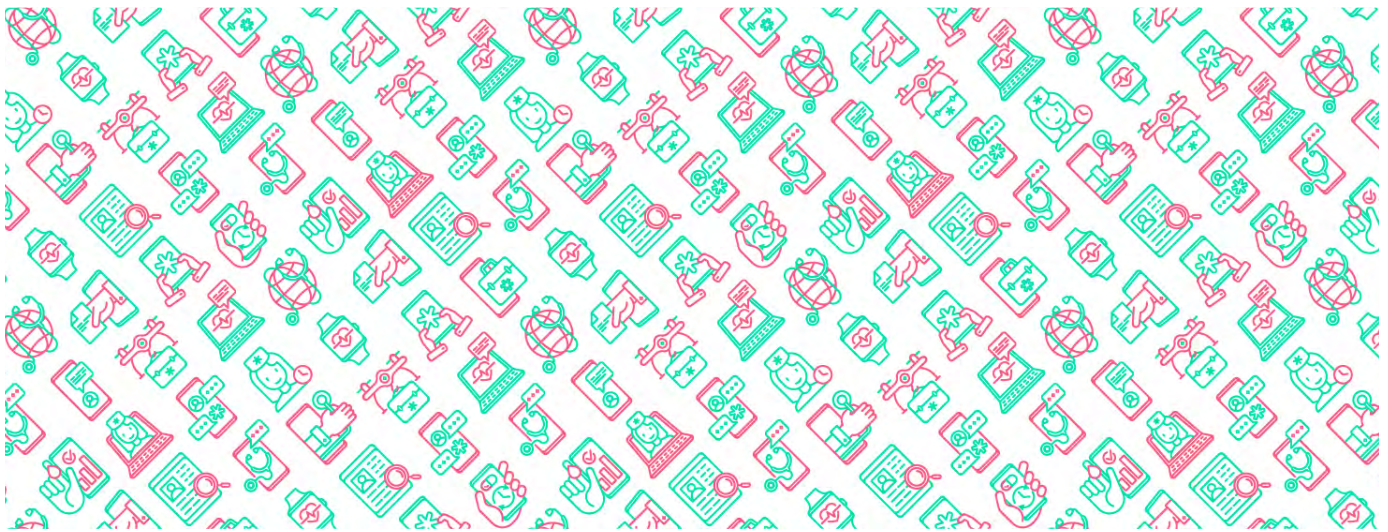
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# Telemedicine in Time of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has boosted the demand for telemedicine services. Not all health systems, however, were ready to switch to this new format, so some corporate providers decided to offer their telehealth platforms for free. The CEO of one such company talks about the thinking behind the step and shares his vision of telemedicine's role in the future.



## ✓ Key Points

- The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a real threat of healthcare systems being overwhelmed. To avoid this, telemedicine has become an essential element.
- The surge in demand for telehealth services made it clear that such systems should be available to all of society, which led some companies to give healthcare professionals free access to their platforms.
- Thanks to this, it was possible for doctors to attend to patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection while maintaining social distancing and basic hygiene rules.
- Telemedicine will eventually become part of conventional medical care, and this requires certain adaptation from various agencies including governmental regulatory bodies.

COVID-19 has forced us to change, or perhaps it is better said that we have had to adapt. Before the coronavirus pandemic, in 'normal' times, medical practices and hospitals in Spain were already very busy. In Spain, there was an average of 7.26 visits to the doctor per inhabitant, which is well above the

European average of 6.80, according to figures released by Eurostat in 2017. Fast forward to the present, and the novel coronavirus has brought this system to the brink of collapse. The duty and obligation of those who are a part of the health sector has been to help as much as possible, making

everything that is needed available to avoid reaching that point. Digitalisation has been key to this.

When observing the trend that telemedicine was acquiring in China, it was found that in the first few weeks of lockdown, healthcare professionals attended via telemedicine to

176,368 people suffering from any of the symptoms of COVID-19. From this observation, we knew that the escalation of COVID-19 measures was going to become a worldwide trend and that companies that had this technology would need to make it available to all of society. As a company dedicated to providing technological solutions to doctors, we decided to help the healthcare system by making available to all medical professionals in the countries in which we have a presence, both from our network of specialists and to anyone who needed it, our telemedicine services at no cost. These costs were assumed by the company. We made this decision to alleviate the difficult situation experienced by both the health sector and patients, who in order not to congest hospitals and medical centres, were postponing their health check-ups and doctors' appointments.

ever. As a result of this decision, we activated other tools such as an electronic medical prescription service, a platform for exchanging medical documents and an immediate medical consultation chat service. Together, these technological solutions allow doctors to overcome the obstacles presented by lockdown in continuing to deliver care to their patients. All of these services were, once again, at no cost to doctors during the COVID-19 crisis. Thanks to these tools, doctors can:

- Prescribe medication in a regulated way through an electronic prescription, and the patient can exchange it directly at the pharmacy for their treatment.
- Exchange tests, reports or results safely with patients.
- Resolve any medical question instantly online.

COVID-19 has rewritten healthcare

practices are establishing a strict appointment policy, with the most urgent of patients seeing the doctor in practice, whilst the rest continue to consult the doctor via video calls. This allows patients to resume their health care as soon as possible, but to do so without increasing their risk of COVID-19 infection.

From my point of view, there is still another step to be taken in the use of these technologies, which we will see with the arrival of the new normal. We will observe a phase, in which the concept of telemedicine will be fully integrated into conventional medical care, as well as into the offers given by health insurers, who will undoubtedly include this service in their coverage to support their policyholders. For this to happen, social, health, business, educational and above all governmental areas must be adapted. At present, Spain does not have a

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## Now that medical consultations are starting to resume as lockdown measures gradually de-escalate, the vast majority continue to do so through telemedicine

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Telemedicine has helped health professionals during this pandemic in several ways. Firstly, it has allowed practitioners to attend to possible cases of COVID-19 before referring those in person to hospitals, thus helping to decongest them. It has also helped doctors to continue caring for patients who could not attend face-to-face appointments. Lastly, and above all, it has allowed health care to be given to patients, without compromising social distancing and hygiene measures.

On top of this we wanted to go further and offer complete solutions to doctors and patients. Therefore, we decided to accelerate our pending technological developments so that we could offer them during a time when they would be needed more than

as we know it. Almost overnight we have found ourselves in the future of technological healthcare, which many thought would not become a reality for some time. In fact, technological players have gone from having to spend hours trying to demonstrate how the digital transformation of the health sector helps everyone, to seeing demand for these types of solutions, both by the private and public sectors, multiply by 30 in just two months. Now the current challenge is getting these tools to perform fluidly with this sudden increase in demand.

Now that medical consultations are starting to resume as lockdown measures gradually de-escalate, the vast majority continue to do so through telemedicine. Many

specific regulation on this matter, but one must be established. It should be noted that the use of this technology has always been totally secure, to encrypt the data that are handled and the conversations held, and maintain the anonymity of the patient. For this, a number of national and European laws are applied, including the GDPR.

To summarise, we are learning from these very difficult times, seeing what the needs are and solving deficiencies in record time. This is all thanks to digitalisation, which has helped the healthcare system to electronically close the circle in the doctor-patient dynamic. Above all, this has transformed this relationship into one that does not require the patient to leave home if it is not absolutely necessary. ■