



Editorial

Telemedicine and Medicolegal Practice: Current Challenges and Legal Perspectives

A patient in a remote village consults a specialist hundreds of kilometres away through a smartphone. A prescription is generated instantly, investigations are advised electronically, and follow-up occurs without either party ever meeting in person. Just a decade ago, such a scenario would have seemed extraordinary; today, it has become an integral part of healthcare delivery. Telemedicine has undoubtedly revolutionized medical practice by overcoming geographical barriers and improving access to care. Yet, alongside its remarkable benefits, it has introduced a new generation of medicolegal challenges that healthcare professionals can no longer afford to ignore.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of telemedicine across India, transforming it from an optional service into a necessity. The Telemedicine Practice Guidelines of 2020 provided a much-needed regulatory framework and offered clinicians a degree of legal clarity. However, technology often evolves faster than regulation, and many practical and legal questions continue to emerge.

At the heart of telemedicine lies a fundamental shift in the doctor–patient relationship. Traditional clinical encounters rely heavily on physical examination, non-verbal communication, and direct observation. Virtual consultations, while convenient, inevitably limit these elements. Physicians are often required to make clinical judgments based on patient-reported symptoms, photographs, video feeds, and digital records. While most consultations proceed safely, the possibility of missed diagnoses, delayed interventions, and misunderstandings remains a significant concern. Consequently, issues of professional negligence and standard of care have acquired renewed importance in the digital era.

Equally important is the issue of informed consent. In conventional practice, consent is often obtained through face-to-face discussion and documentation. In telemedicine, ensuring that patients fully understand the limitations, risks, and scope of virtual consultations becomes even more critical. Clear communication and meticulous documentation remain the clinician's strongest safeguards.

Another challenge concerns confidentiality. The doctor's consulting room has now expanded into smartphones, laptops, cloud servers, and digital platforms. While technology enables seamless communication, it also exposes sensitive health information to risks such as data breaches, unauthorized access, and cybercrime. With the implementation of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, healthcare professionals bear an even greater responsibility to protect patient privacy and maintain trust.

The growing integration of artificial intelligence, wearable devices, remote monitoring systems, and mobile health applications further complicates the medicolegal landscape. These technologies offer exciting possibilities for early diagnosis and personalized care, yet they raise important questions about accountability when errors occur. If an algorithm fails, who bears responsibility—the developer, the platform, or the treating physician?

Despite these challenges, telemedicine is not merely a temporary innovation; it is an essential component of the future healthcare ecosystem. The task before the medical profession is not to resist technological change but to embrace it responsibly. Robust legal frameworks, continuous professional education, ethical vigilance, and comprehensive documentation must evolve alongside technological advancement.

Ultimately, telemedicine succeeds only when it preserves the foundation upon which all medical practice rests: patient trust. As healthcare enters an increasingly digital future, maintaining that trust through professionalism, accountability, and respect for legal and ethical principles will remain the defining challenge of modern medical practice.

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