

What COVID-19 Tells Us About the Importance of Telehealth in Underserved Areas

After a year of research and development, EMBER launched on November 11, 2019. As a comprehensive telehealth platform, EMBER is the first of its kind to offer remote care services in Egypt and rural America, connecting physicians of all specialties with patients via video and live text.

In our first 4 months of operation, we've grown a network of 10,000 patients and 500 doctors. We've logged 1500 hours of total call and text time. In a nation whose health system struggles with providing accessible care, EMBER provides ease, affordability, and immediacy.

And then COVID-19 hit.

On February 15, 2020, Egypt reported its [first case of COVID-19](#). As of the writing of this article, Egypt health officials report [59 people in total have contracted the virus](#). Like other nations around the world that are battling this global pandemic, we can assume that there are many more cases out there—and many more that will arise in the coming months.

In the past month since the initial outbreak, our call count spiked over 35%; our patient network grew by 50%. It's clear from our momentum that EMBER's telehealth services were in high demand from the beginning, and the pandemic has indeed exacerbated this.

So what have we learned so far from our own experience and from telehealth progress around the globe? What lessons may come? And what role will telehealth play in the future, long after this pandemic has passed?

1) It takes enthusiasm from every player in the healthcare system to increase telehealth adoption rates.

Since Egypt has thus far lacked telehealth resources, we'll draw from US research to make our case here.

While adoption rates have increased steadily over the last decade, including a [340% interest rate increase](#) among physicians since 2015, overall patient adoption rates are low. [75% of patients](#) still aren't using telehealth due to a variety of access barriers—primarily a lack of awareness around accessibility and cost.

The necessity of social distancing in the face of COVID-19, the CDC's golden rule and Twitter's latest trending hashtag, makes telehealth an appealing and obvious choice for patients of all demographics in an unprecedented way.

For the first time, we're seeing the entire healthcare ecosystem commit to telehealth adoption—that includes public and private insurers, hospital systems, medical staff, and

patients. This isn't just for patients who grew up with smartphones; seniors and senior care staff in nursing homes around the globe are using telehealth services for consultation and care.

For the first time, we are also seeing significant government support for telehealth across all its uses (not just triage). In Ohio, Governor Mike DeWine [filed emergency rules](#) for complete mental health coverage for the remainder of the COVID-19 outbreak. The US Congress and Senate are [considering bills](#) that make remote monitoring systems in skilled nursing facilities more easily accessible. And of course, the US federal government [lifted restrictions](#) on Medicare telehealth coverage during *all* national emergencies.

Patients and physicians alike are eager to use telehealth, and with the support and collaboration of government and insurance agencies, we are finally seeing widespread emphasis and education around telehealth resources.

2) Telehealth—especially in Egypt and the greater MENA region—is a permanent solution to physician shortages and insufficient infrastructure.

In Egypt, there are only .8 physicians per every 1000 people. In an otherwise frenzied health landscape of long wait times and chaotic emergency rooms, patients often find themselves delaying care until symptoms or conditions turn dire.

With the rise of COVID-19, it is more important than ever that access to doctors be easy and immediate, for those presenting cold and flu symptoms but also pre-existing conditions and chronic diseases. Since the outbreak, 900+ patients have turned to EMBER doctors to receive remote care—meaning 900+ people have avoided potential infection by forgoing unnecessary trips through crowded streets and clinics.

In non-pandemic times, EMBER continues to allow physicians to connect with patients quickly; EMBER's AI chatbot I system also triages patients to direct them to the right specialist, saving crucial time and allowing physicians to consult and treat more patients throughout the day.

Changing medical infrastructure is a long process; telehealth provides an effective, low-cost, and much-needed interim solution that can influence and inspire infrastructure changes that may take more time.

3) COVID-19 is the start of a true paradigm shift in healthcare delivery.

On an international scale, we are roughly two months into a pandemic with no true end in sight. What we do know is that it will end, and that with the ongoing support of nations around the world, we can significantly decrease the number of infections over time.

At EMBER, we're focusing on the good, on the future that extends beyond this pandemic's end—a future that has learned its lesson and understands the importance of affordable, easy-to-access care for all.

Telehealth opens doors for enhanced disease prevention, both infectious and chronic. Without the barriers of cost, wait times, and missing work, physician consultations are more immediate, and symptoms are treated quickly.

Telehealth also provides an outlet for greater collaboration within healthcare systems. Physicians can broaden their network, and patients can seek care based on quality rather than geographic location.

Most importantly, a renewed commitment to telehealth ensures that areas that lack traditional health infrastructure remain connected to the care they need, whether that's rural Louisiana or a sprawling urban center in Egypt. Every individual deserves quality, affordable care.

While we regret the circumstances of our times, EMBER is proud to be paving the way for the next wave of healthcare delivery in the MENA region. We are eager to continue our mission to help physicians provide better care to underserved areas around the world. We're happy that the world is on board.

If you are an Egypt-based physician or psychiatrist interested in registering with us, you can download the EMBER Medics app on iOS or Android.