Facebooking your doctor's appointment

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Telemedicine, which allows doctors to communicate, diagnose and even treat their patients remotely is on the rise thanks to advances in information technology. It allows healthcare workers to securely monitor patients in inaccessible parts of the world as well as providing more timely responses for patients in many situations. New research published in the *International Journal of Medical Engineering and Informatics* suggests that the well-known social networking site, Facebook, and smart phone use could make telemedicine even more common and useful in healthcare.

Agostino Giorgio of the Politecnico di Bari, Italy, points out that, for most patients, telemedicine means fewer hospital visits, but it also provides critical services that might otherwise be unavailable. Remote heart monitoring and other diagnostic tools are quite common. Now, Giorgio has developed smart phone software, an application or "app", that connects patient and doctor via the social networking site Facebook, although it could be adapted to work with another such networking system.

The Care-App allows private and secure communication between doctor and patient as well as offering a medication diary for the patient rescue call and clinic search and booking utility. Video connectivity makes the visit more personal but also allows a patient to show the doctor some symptoms or problems. There is also the option to use a "tele-stethoscope" device that connects to the smart phone headphone jack and would be provided to the patient or their carer. Giorgio and colleagues in the Cardiology department have already tested and

validated a tele-stethoscope with this app. Other devices such as blood-oxygen saturation and pulse monitor, electrocardiogram (e.g. the AliveCor Heart Monitor), thermometer could also be used in conjunction with the smart phone input or in some cases simply through the video connection or a verbal/textual reporting of temperature, for instance.

"The patient also may use the Facebook share button or private message button, to send the doctor any other kind of information he may acquire and store with its own smart phone, concerning its own health status," says Giorgio. "Care-app manages all these steps, apps and operations, performed by the doctor and by the patient during the remote medical visit." Care-App is written in HTML5/Java, and so should work on any operating system with all smart devices - smart phones, tablets, notebook and desktop computers.

'The app offers patients frequent and easy check-up in the privacy of the home and by avoiding expensive hospitalization,' adds Giorgio. 'This could permit a significant saving of the healthcare expenses and an improvement of the quality of chronic patient's life.'

More information: Giorgio, A. (2016) 'Social networks, apps and smartphones for telemedicine', *Int. J. Medical Engineering and Informatics*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp.183–195.

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