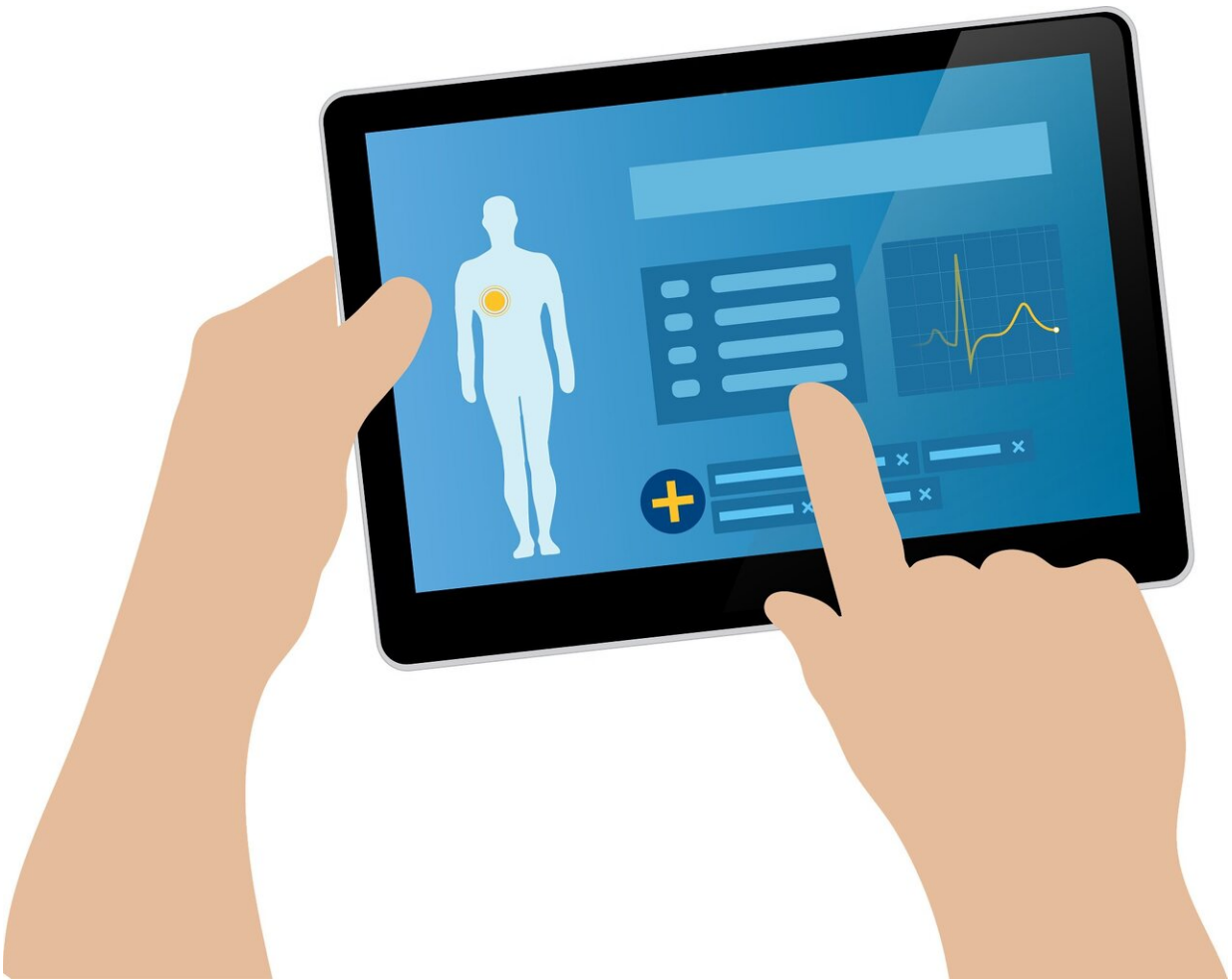# China's digital mental health services outpacing regulation

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The Lau China Institute has launched a new policy paper, by Dr. Carla de Utra Mendes, on the digital mental health landscape in China post-COVID-19, and in particular, the rapid digital response from the Chinese Government as well as private enterprise.

Across the globe, the pandemic has had a significantly detrimental effect on people's mental health. Nationwide survey results in China estimate that early on in the pandemic, as many as 35 percent of its respondents were suffering from some form of psychological distress due to the outbreak of COVID-19.

"It is important to remember that, for all the arguments about the origination of COVID-19, in terms of its impact on the lives and wellbeing of individuals, China experienced the same kinds of challenges as most other places, including the US and Europe", Dr. de Utra Mendes said.

In China, the COVID-19 pandemic is considered a great digital accelerator, which rapidly called for the adoption of 'e-mental health' services. In fact, 89 percent of healthcare professionals in China are using telehealth and 73 percent are administering telemedicine.

Moreover, digital technology has allowed swathes of Chinese people to access e-health interventions and information via public health campaigns. From March 2020, there was an increase of 85.4 million internet users, reaching 989 million netizens by the end of the year.

Dr. de Utra Mendes says that "despite a rapid and comprehensive psychological provision response from the Chinese Government, the impact on its mental health system was significant, bringing increased pressure on a system already fragile and with uneven geographical distribution."

China's largest corporations have been at the forefront of innovative digital health interventions with companies such as Tencent WeDoctor, Ping An Good Doctor and Ali Health providing millions of remote consultations during COVID-19 with thousands of medical professionals.

However, the use of technology in mental health interventions is not without risks, particularly when it comes to the access and use of data and applications of AI where regulation and governance is limited. China aims to be a world leader in AI by 2030 and the State Council has sanctioned the use of big data in the health sector—including electronic health records and the integration of data with the Internet of Things.

This data can be used for positive interventions and there are specific examples both pre- and during COVID-19 in which such systems of real-time monitoring with the aid of AI have been used for suicide prevention, as in the case of the Tree Hole⍰⍰⍰⍰project that, up to the end of 2020, prevented thousands of potential suicide attempts by analyzing and rating netizens comments on online 'tree holes'.

To respond to these challenges, the policy paper puts forward 3 policy recommendations:

- Establish better risk assessment & quality control for digital health interventions;
- Establish global ethical AI development in mental health;
- Strengthen psychosocial support to develop a people-centered digital system.

This paper forms part of the China in the World Policy Paper Series 2020/2021.

More information: Policy paper:

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