

REaCH Trial: Trustworthiness and Safety of Remote Consultations for Chronic Diseases in Health Facilities, Tanzania

Beatrice Chipwaza, Titus Mashanya, Albino Kalolo, Sylvester Ndegese & Senga Pemba

St. Francis University College of Health and Allied Sciences, Ifakara, Tanzania

Email: bchipwaza@sfuchas.ac.tz

Background

- In Tanzania, mobile phones usage and network coverage has expanded at a very high rate. Strategies and actions to expand them further are ongoing.
- Currently, WHO is advocating for remote delivery of healthcare using mobile phones to reduce risks of transmission of diseases such as COVID-19 within populations and to health workers.
- Although a number of digital health projects are being implemented, there is paucity of information in Tanzania on how to rapidly develop and deploy safe and trustworthy remote consulting in ways that are fit for the available infrastructure and resources
- It is on these grounds that the Remote Consulting in Healthcare (REaCH) trial is being implemented so as to generate evidence to address this gap.

Objectives

Overall Objective:

To implement and evaluate a Remote Consultation intervention in health facilities based in Morogoro region.

Specific Objectives:

1. To determine patients' perceptions on the trustworthiness and safety of remote consultations
2. To determine the rate of consultations before and after the training of healthcare workers (HCWs) on remote consultations
3. To explore what enables and hinders health workers in deploying remote consulting.

Study Design and Methodology

- **Study design:** This is an Experimental study using a 'Stepped-wedge Cluster Randomised Trial'.
- The study has three components 1) training of health workers, 2) delivery of mobile consulting services and 3) process evaluation

Methods ctd...

- **Study area:** The study is being conducted in Morogoro Region involving health facilities/clusters from Ifakara Town Council, Ulanga, Mlimba, Malinyi, Kilosa and Mvomero districts.
- **Study population:** Health workers and NCD adult patients (diabetes, hypertension chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or heart diseases) who receive healthcare from the selected healthcare facilities.
- **Sample and sampling procedure:**
 - Cluster sampling was employed to select health facilities to make a total of 20 clusters, which were later on randomized for intervention.
 - Random sampling was employed to select 100 active patients with NCD from each cluster
- **Data collection:** Telephone interviews with patients to explore their perceptions and experiences of remote consulting and its impact on their healthcare.
- Process evaluation through telephone interviews with facility managers, trained healthcare workers and patients, to determine what works & what does not work.



Results

- This study is ongoing, the final results will be presented after March 2022 when the study ends.
- **Short term results:** Remote consultations established in 16 health facilities where HCWs had already received remote training (REaCH). In the first four months, 2,338 consultations were done through face to face while 349 consultations were done through mobile phones.

Results ctd...

Expected results by March 2022:

1. Percentages of patients with mobile phone ownership, and those with access to a mobile phone determined.
2. Percentage of patients with mobile phone network connectivity and access to stable network connectivity determined.
3. The safety of remote consultations among NCD patients and the percentage of patients who trust Remote consultation will be determined.

Conclusion

- The possession of mobile phone by both healthcare workers and patients provides is an opportunity to implement mobile consultation even in rural areas.
- Use of Remote consultations could help in removing geographic and economic barriers in accessing healthcare particularly in emergency situations and in care for people with long term conditions.

Recommendations

- Final results from this unique study should widely be disseminated so as to increase awareness on remote consultations.
- Remote consultations should be considered seriously especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic.
- A similar study for other medical conditions should be undertaken so as to provide more evidence.

Acknowledgements

- We acknowledge the support of our partners King's College London and University of Warwick
- We thank the RMO Morogoro and district authorities in the region as well as the study participants.
- This project is funded by UKRI/GCRF/Newton Fund