

## PREFACE

The basic objective of sustainable human development, as we know it, is to create an enabling environment for people in terms of quality of health, education and standard of living. This objective, however, is usually pushed aside, particularly in developing countries, in favor of other immediate concerns such as the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth. The fact that health has an important role in enhancing productive capacities that help in accelerating the process of development is generally overlooked. The South, comprising many developing countries and having a quarter of the world's population, is therefore, marked by a weak healthcare-system, and a staggering burden of diseases.

Developing countries around the world share common challenges in healthcare. Fortunately, technology as well as patient and professional acceptance have started to reach levels where telehealth offers a practical and effective solution for delivering healthcare services to people in remote and isolated areas. Until quite recently, telehealth was a relatively new concept, as far as most developing countries were concerned. Today, technology has enabled providers of healthcare to readily share data, images, expertise, and diagnostic procedures, through extensive use of diagnostic equipment, together with multimedia, and videoconferencing capabilities, so that telehealth is no longer an unfamiliar phenomenon. Recent advances in information technology and telecommunications have made telehealth both affordable and feasible. As a result, telehealth has been recognized as a tool that holds the promise to provide equitable access to timely, efficient, and quality healthcare and health information.

Keeping in view the poor state of healthcare in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, COMSATS took the initiative of launching telehealth services in the Northern Areas. A project with the name 'ICTs for Rural Development of Remote and Mountainous Areas of Northern Pakistan', was initiated in January 2004. Its overall objective was to facilitate activities for alleviation of poverty, improve access to specialized health services and IT education and, thereby, contribute towards raising the standard of living in the focused communities, through action-research in the application of ICTs.

Baltistan Health and Education Foundation (BHEF) founded in 1990, has been working to mobilize healthcare services for women in the remote and backward regions of Baltistan. The foundation collaborated with COMSATS to implement and make the first such project in the area a success. International Development Research Centre (IDRC); the Crown Corporation is the principal

funding organization. Introduction of telehealth services in the Northern Areas of Pakistan has provided a breakthrough to a large section of the population through provision of healthcare.

A major concern of the developing countries, however, is to make smart choices and invest wisely in the future use of telehealth, in view of the continued fiscal and human resource constraints on healthcare, in this highly competitive world. Factors such as to determine the impacts, benefits and limitations of telehealth, as well as to devise cost-effective and community-specific programs of telehealth, are other important issues. It was in this background that COMSATS organized a one-day seminar on telehealth in August, 2007, to discuss current trends in telehealth and to propose effective solutions for the future of telehealth in Pakistan. Ultimately the mission of this Seminar was to understand how new technologies could be appropriately employed to improve health in the country. The aim was to learn both from projects now underway and past experiences, with an eye to developing new approaches and initiatives.

Key experts belonging to diverse fields, including health and IT, from across the country participated in the seminar to make it a success. This book is a compilation of the various papers presented during the seminar.

This book is an effort on COMSATS' part to disseminate information and experiences related to telehealth, particularly in various policy-making, healthcare-providing and development circles, and to create awareness regarding telehealth, in general. I am hopeful that this book will help in improved understanding and addressing of health-related issues, through easier and more flexible healthcare-services and support.

I am confident that this publication will prove to be worth every reader's time and attention and will encourage COMSATS to bring out even better and useful publications in future as well. Lastly, I am thankful to all the esteemed authors who have contributed papers in this book, and also to COMSATS' competent team especially Dr. M.M Qurashi, Mr. Irfan Hayee, Dr. Azeema Farid, Mr. Imran Chaudhry, and Ms. Sadia Nawaz for their efforts in compiling, editing and publishing this book.

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