

SA Telemedicine and eHealth Conference
Medical Research Council
Tygerberg, Cape Town, 13 September 2011
Address by Prof H Russel Botman,
Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University

Thank you, chairperson. Goeiedag, almal. Molweni. Good day, everyone. Honourable guests and distinguished colleagues:

- **Dr [Gwen] Ramokgopa**, [Deputy Minister of Health]
- **Mr [Derek] Hanekom**, [Deputy Minister of Science & Technology]
- **Mr [Obbed] Bapela**, [Deputy Minister of Communications]
- **Prof [Muhammad Ali] Dhansay**, [Acting President of the MRC]
- **Prof [Lizo] Mazwai**, [Chairperson of the MRC Board]
- **Ms [Jill] Fortuin**, [Director of Telemedicine and mHealth at the MRC] ... >> > > . > > >
 > .Ladies and gentlemen ...

What an exciting field we are here to discuss – telemedicine and eHealth. The very terms conjure up futuristic images of digital scanners and space ships, like we see in Star Trek movies.

But there's another reason why I find this field exciting, and to explain why, I want to take you back in time –more than two thousand years, in fact, to Ancient Greece – home to many a great scientist.

I want to mention one in particular – no, not Hippocrates, though a reference to a great physician would certainly have been appropriate at this conference.

Instead, I want to quote a great mathematician and engineer – Archimedes, the man who explained the workings of levers. He is famously said to have remarked:

Give me a place to stand on, and I will move the Earth.

With this statement he demonstrated the power of science. He explained how it is that by using pulleys, we can lift objects far too heavy to move otherwise.

But he also set an agenda for science that remains relevant to this day – to move the Earth. Not literally, of course, but figuratively – to take on seemingly impossible tasks. He challenges us to use our theoretical knowledge to develop practical technology to go beyond our limits.

Is that not what you are doing? I think so.

Telemedicine and eHealth – including mHealth -- want to extend the limited resources we have at our disposal to people on the margins of society – people who live in rural areas, far from well-resourced urban centres.

This is certainly something that needs to be done urgently. Rural areas house nearly half of South Africa's population, yet they are relatively underdeveloped compared to urban areas.

Despite romantic notions of the “simple, country life”, the harsh reality is that far too many people in rural areas suffer the burden of poverty – and everything that goes with it, such as limited access to crucial health care.

This is recognised in the government's Medium-Term Strategic Framework, which makes rural development a strategic priority. Stellenbosch University supports this goal. We have incorporated a rural focus into all facets of our key activities – be that research, teaching and learning, or community interaction.

This is in line with how we see our role – and that of science – in society. It should be guided by two notions – excellence and relevance. The idea is to put the best science possible at the service of the people who need it most.

This approach is captured in Stellenbosch University's HOPE Project, which was launched just over a year ago, and is already bearing fruit. Two of the five themes of the HOPE Project are the eradication of poverty, and the promotion of human health and dignity. They find expression in a range of initiatives across the University.

One of these is the Ukwanda Rural Clinical School that our Faculty of Health Sciences is busy establishing in Worcester, in partnership with the government. It also has branches in surrounding towns, such as Ceres, Robertson, Caledon, Hermanus and Swellendam. The idea is to train more healthcare professionals by focusing on underserved rural sites. This will benefit local communities, and will also enrich our academic teaching and research.

The Ukwanda RCS has a telemedicine and eHealth component. Our medical students in their 5th and 6th years of study who receive part of their training on rotation in rural areas take netbook computers with them. In this and other ways they learn how technology can be used to deliver better health care.

Another of our HOPE Project initiatives is a cluster of activities in our Faculty of Engineering, called Communication and Information Systems. This is where we are developing advanced biomedical and diagnostic technology to help meet health care needs through telemedicine.

Our scientists have for instance developed innovative devices to monitor heart and lung function, reflexes and eye movement. These can be used by skilled technicians, and the data can be accessed by doctors and specialists far away in other towns and cities – as if they were in the consulting room with the patient.

Stellenbosch – in partnership with the Medical Research Council – has developed the country's first short course in telemedicine. Since February this year, 70 officials from the Department of Health completed their three-day introduction to the field. I understand they will be receiving their certificates at this conference. Congratulations! I think they deserve a hand ... [APPLAUSE].

Hopefully we will reach the point soon where we can offer other qualifications in telemedicine. The field certainly has the potential to attract students from a variety of disciplines – medicine, engineering, education – for advanced studies in telemedicine.

Interdisciplinary cooperation is crucial if we want to meet the multifaceted and complex challenges posed by development needs. We should give some thought to a Centre for eHealth that brings together various sectors, just as many sectors are represented at this conference.

In closing, let me refer to the theme of this conference – “Prove your hypothesis”. To me, this says that we need to stimulate further research and innovation in telemedicine and eHealth.

In this regard, I want to urge you to work closely with the new Centre for Evidence-based Health Care in our Faculty of Health Sciences, the first of its kind in the country.

It is very important to ensure that the treatment decisions of healthcare professionals are based on the best scientific evidence available. The approach of evidence-based healthcare teaches healthcare providers how to separate good research from bad. In this way they can take informed decision on treatment.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us expand telemedicine and eHealth into the powerful instruments they promise to be – for the sake of all the people of South Africa and the rest of our continent.

Let us find solid ground, dig in our levers and “move the Earth”.

Thank you.