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Status and applications of space science and technology

Technical Forum

Conclusions and proposals of the Workshop on Telemedicine

1. The Workshop on Telemedicine highlighted the significance of telecommunications in general, including space-based communications, to the health sector and medical services. It was agreed that the pace and impact of developments in that area were such that telecommunications would come to be such a routine support to health and medical care that the prefix “tele-” would become superfluous.
2. The Workshop stressed the need for harmonization and collaboration between local and global programmes in telemedicine and telehealth, both in the technical and in the medical and health-care sectors. Special emphasis was given to cooperation with and support of developing countries and the requirements for global services. Easy access at affordable costs to space infrastructure such as low-Earth and geostationary Earth orbit satellites for communications and Earth observation (such as climate and biotop monitoring for disease prediction and prevention) was considered a key prerequisite for the necessary quick implementation and dissemination of telemedicine services.
3. The Workshop made the following recommendations:
 - (a) Telemedicine should be promoted in a way that enabled developing countries to adapt their health-care systems to their own specific needs and local conditions (environment, economy, social structure and so on);
 - (b) Telemedicine should be implemented with a view to improving work in areas of concern:
 - (i) Care for the individual citizen, in particular in the under-served population, by introducing electronic patient records, electronic prescriptions and concepts of shared and integrated care;
 - (ii) Health-care systems as such (cost containment and better and faster information services with better generation and dissemination of knowledge);

(c) The continuous improvement of the health-care system must be based upon cost-benefit analyses, efficacy and efficiency and should take into account national socio-economic characteristics;

(d) Basic and continuous medical education for professionals and awareness programmes for the public should be an integral part of the telemedicine solutions promoted and adopted. Those programmes should be developed on the basis of international cooperation and should be made part of national medical education activities;

(e) Existing regional applications and networks should be supported and made to interlink to each other;

(f) Appropriate technical and medical standards need to be agreed upon;

(g) The international cooperation within the framework of the International Space Station programme should be seen as a unique chance to foster international and multicultural collaboration and the interoperability of services and technologies;

(h) Summarizing the results of the ongoing experiments of global medical emergency networks and their evaluation and promotion should be organized. Such networks should offer services to governmental and non-governmental organizations in the case of natural and/or man-made disasters;

(i) A unique, globally valid emergency call number should be established that is available to individual citizens worldwide;

(j) Space nations and agencies should offer access points within their space and terrestrial infrastructure for services that support the daily needs of citizens.

4. The Workshop also recommended that continuous concerted efforts be made by the working groups of the Group of Eight and by the World Health Organization, the International Telecommunication Union and the United Nations with a view to:

(a) The definition and promotion of concepts for a flexible technical infrastructure, adaptable to health services in different economic and cultural environments, including developing countries, and based on a clear vision of the existing and the emerging growth of telecommunications and information-processing capabilities;

(b) The definition of a generally acceptable legal and ethical framework that would also cover aspects of privacy and confidentiality to enable cooperation and the cross-border exchange of services;

(c) The orientation of the above activities to the needs of patients and to criteria of cost-benefit and sustainability.

5. The Workshop strongly recommended support for the organization and funding of concerted action to achieve the above objectives.
