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HealthX Africa: Empathetic Leadership as an Asset in Telehealth

The uncertainty and economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic hit the vitality and viability of healthcare enterprises globally, including in Kenya.¹ In March 2020, the first case was confirmed in the East African nation, and by June 2020, the Kenyan government imposed a nationwide curfew, restricting individuals' movement to limit the spread of the virus.² With public anxiety surrounding the possibility of infections from physically visiting hospitals or clinics,³ the Kenyan government explored alternatives to in-person healthcare services.⁴ By February 2021, the Kenyan Medical Practitioners and Dentists Council (KMPDC) issued provisional licenses to 20 healthcare facilities to provide virtual services.⁵ Launched in the second half of 2021, HealthX Africa became a rapidly growing telemedicine startup within the telehealth ecosystem, and Radha Karnad, its chief medical officer, soon became a globe-trotting executive.

However, despite the rapid growth of the company's telemedicine services and highly positive reactions from patients, Karnad and her co-founders worried about the future of HealthX Africa. Around the globe, consumer demand for telemedicine started to decline once the pandemic faded. Many patients lacked trust in telehealth services⁶ and preferred in-person healthcare.⁷ As the world returned to business as usual in 2023, regulatory exemptions and waivers for telemedicine providers also started to expire.⁸ Even by July 2023, the Kenyan government had yet to formalize rules and regulations surrounding the operation and governance of telemedicine services. Telemedicine providers would soon face the pressures of operating in an ambiguous and fragmented regulatory environment in a high compliance sector⁹ without compromising their patients' safety and quality of care. Confronting this harsh reality, Karnad and her co-founders knew they needed to convince policymakers and consumers of the transformative value of telehealth and telemedicine. And yet, as they formulated their strategies to build trust with different stakeholders, they were acutely aware of their resource constraints as a startup in a nascent ecosystem.

A Journey into Telehealth Entrepreneurship

Radha Karnad had always been motivated by contributing to societal change and equity, leading her to study medicine and later train with the National Health Service in the United Kingdom as a physician.

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