

Collaborative Telehealth Actions for Latin America

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INTRODUCCIÓN

Since 2009, a Latin American group of health leaders and managers has been working collaboratively and through a virtual forum on the topic of telehealth.

The Laboratory of Excellence and Innovation in Telehealth, coordinated by the Center for Health Technology at the UFMG Medicine School, has brought, since its creation in 2006, the exchange of these experiences in telehealth in Latin America.

With the launch of the *Revista Latinoamericana de Telesalud*¹ in 2009, it was possible to monitor the development of national telehealth actions, projects, and programs in LAC countries. Articles have already been published from Argentina (8), Brazil (92), Colombia (5), Costa Rica (3), Chile (2), Ecuador (11), El Salvador (6), Guatemala (4), Mexico (14), Panama (1), Peru (8) and Venezuela (2).

Also in 2009, this exchange was strengthened and further consolidated through the cooperation agreement signed between 14 countries, through the IDB Project (Regional protocols of public policies for telehealth/RG-TI509)², which resulted in the development of a pioneering model for assessing the degree of telehealth maturity in countries.

This group remained active throughout these years (with some modifications) and developed several other collaborative actions such as telehealth training courses, malaria training for border countries in the Amazon³, the creation of a committee for good practices in telehealth, and the publication of a book called *Desarrollo de la telesalud en America Latina*⁴.

During the pandemic, the LAC group produced the article "Telehealth actions to address COVID-19 in Latin American Countries" published in the journal *Telemedicine & eHealth*.⁵

The topic of quality in telehealth services is currently under discussion with the active participation of 12 countries: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay. The participants are mostly representatives of the government (telehealth area or correspondent) and two universities (Chile and Honduras).

Although not all countries have a national telehealth program or policy, the pandemic has caused the use of telehealth resources to advance in all

of them, even with great inequality in terms of its use in each one.

In countries with national programs, such as Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil, the use of telehealth tools helped to combat the pandemic by expanding and promoting new types of care, such as telemonitoring and teleguidance. Peru changed its telehealth regulations in 2020. Argentina already had a national plan since 2018 and a telehealth network of over 500 hospitals, which helped to combat COVID-19. Uruguay, which began its national project based on digital images, implemented the use of digital prescriptions in 2020 and enacted telemedicine and telework laws. Ecuador, which faces major difficulties and restrictions on connectivity, has maintained discontinuous actions despite already having a national project. Costa Rica, like the others, has diversified the use of telehealth resources during and after the pandemic. Guatemala and Honduras are still seeking knowledge and technologies to implement their national telehealth systems and have not presented evidence of the use of telehealth during the pandemic.

Concerning legislation, many regulations, and transitional and/or permanent laws have been created. Among them, a supreme decree that approves the regulation of law 30421, a framework law for telehealth in Peru; Peru and Ecuador, through the Andean parliament, created the first digital interconnection network for telehealth; in Argentina, electronic or digital prescriptions are now permitted by a law created in 2020 valid for the entire national territory. El Salvador establishes guidelines for the development of preventive programs through telehealth and Uruguay enacts law 19.869/2020 for the implementation and development of telehealth as a provision of health services. In Brazil, telehealth has existed as a national program since 2007 but was regulated permanently in December 2022. Colombia has had specific legislation on telehealth since 2010.

These movements show a process of increasing institutionalization of telehealth actions at the national level in several Latin American countries.

For more information about the Latin American telehealth group, visit the website of the Innovation Laboratory of Excellence and Innovation in Telehealth for Latin America and Europe.⁵