

**Editorial****Digital Health During COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond**Rahman SMM<sup>1\*</sup>, Hossain SM<sup>2</sup>, Jahan MU<sup>3</sup>

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Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The virus rapidly spread in different countries across the globe. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as a pandemic on the 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has revealed many areas of public health preparedness those are lacking both in developed and developing countries. Digital interventions provide many opportunities for strengthening health systems.<sup>2</sup> It could be a vital resource and could play a critical role in global response to this public health emergency.

Digital health is the use of digital information and communication technologies for efficient and timely delivery of health care services, aimed at promoting and protecting the health of the individuals and communities. Furthermore, digital technologies are also being used for conducting monitoring and surveillance of the health programmes, health education, research, development of human resources including continued professional development, risk analysis specially the risk communication. Data being generated through services, research, monitoring and surveillance are also used for health management and decision making.

Technologies are used in digital health include both hardware and software including telemedicine, telehealth, mobile health (m health), e-mail, text message, social media, wearable devices, web based analysis, clinic or remote monitoring sensors, health information technology and others.<sup>3,4</sup> Digital health is not only being implemented by the health professionals, it is a multi-disciplinary domain involving a number of stakeholders, including clinicians, researchers and scientists with a wide range of expertise in healthcare, engineering, social sciences, public health, health economics and data management.<sup>5</sup>

Bangladesh has been implementing the digital health services to promote and protect public health, including telehealth, video-consultation, reporting even through data collection from the remote rural areas, monitoring, surveillance, human resource development including continued professional

development etc since long before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, additional services have been added including risk communications, contact tracing and hot spot identification etc, and strengthening of the telemedicine and other pre-existing services. In addition to the public sector, the private sectors also joined hands on the digital health services particularly tele-medicine, video-consultation and others, to serve the population at need.

The government of Bangladesh is well committed to providing equal access to quality health care to all. Digital health is a critical enabler for the overall transformation of the health system. Hence, mainstreaming telemedicine in health system will minimise inequality and barriers to access health care. In July 2020, the Bangladesh has developed telemedicine guidelines, which will be a key enabler in fostering the growth of telemedicine which is being utilised by more healthcare practitioners and patients in a wide variety of forms.<sup>6</sup> The World Health Organization spelled out in its global strategy for digital health, that the use of digital technologies should be safe, ethical, cost-effective and affordable; and it should be people-centred, evidence-based, effective, efficient, sustainable, inclusive, equitable and contextualised.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, it is suggested that the health authorities should expand and strengthen the digital health, for making it an integral part of the health systems, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the experience prior to and during the pandemic, digital health is to be used to promote and protect public health through providing promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative services, as well as real time data sharing, monitoring and surveillance, human resource development including continued professional development, and timely and effective response to the public health emergencies. Its use may be further extended to effective and timely communication with the media, public, decision makers, professional bodies and others. All these efforts will facilitate the progress in attaining the sustainable development goals.

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