

First Telemedicine Conference at Liaquat National Hospital

Budgetary allocations for science and technology have increased by 4,900 per cent during the past two years and government officials can no longer say that they cannot pursue science projects for want of money.

This was stated by the minister for science and technology, Dr Attaur Rehman, at the first telemedicine conference on Saturday at the Liaquat National Hospital.

"In 2000, the government used to allocate Rs120 million for science and project. Two years on, the budgetary allocation has risen to Rs6 billion."

At present, the government was pursuing no fewer than 150 scientific projects in the subjects of physics, chemistry, biology, different disciplines of engineering, etc, according to the minister.

Mr Rehman told the audience that currently the largest digital library of the country, with some 6,000 scientific journals, was operational in Islamabad.

"We have almost succeeded in achieving in two years what India accomplished in 20 years," he claimed.

The minister quoted relevant figures to shore up his argument. "In India, 160 towns/cities are connected by the Internet. In Pakistan, 560 towns/cities are connected by the Internet. In the country, the bandwidth is 265 megabits per second which is a little less than what it is in India."

He said all software houses had been given a 15-year tax waiver so that they could establish themselves in a favourable environment. "The concession is also aimed at attracting foreign investment in the country's information technology sector."

Dr Asif Zafar Malik gave a presentation titled "Telemedicine in Pakistan".

He said: "The country's information technology scene has the potential to initiate telemedicine - the process of providing healthcare facilities to a patient through telecommunications without bringing him to hospital."

"The doctor to population ratio in the country is 1 to 1,500. Similarly, the specialist to population ratio is 1 to 12,000. A large number of people, specially in the rural areas, fail to receive good treatment, available in cities, because they cannot come to the urban areas. To them telemedicine will be exceptionally beneficial."

The adviser to the minister for science and technology, Salman Ansari, said the country had made great strides in the field of science and technology as well as telecommunications. "In two years, mobile connections will outnumber land lines. Two years ago, the number of people capable of using computer was two million. At present, more than 20 million people in the country know how to use computer. At this time, as many as 60,000 homes are using the Internet without employing their telephone lines."

He disclosed that a project of virtual university would be launched in March.

Dr Zakiuddin Ahmed gave a talk on the subject of "Health informatics and telemedicine - paradigm shift". He said there were 100,000 health-related websites in the world, adding that people spent more time visiting health-related websites than pornography.

He said the following two methods were employed for telemedicine: store and forward and real-time communication.

Prof Zulfiqar Bhutta spoke on "Telemedicine and Hala project". He observed that while on paper the country's healthcare infrastructure was the strongest in the world, in practice it suffered from various problems, particularly inefficiency. He talked briefly about infant mortality rate, saying that in hospitals the infant mortality rate was eight per cent, outside hospitals 15 per cent and at homes 32 per cent.