

A vision for informed choices in sexual and reproductive health

 By [Katja Hamilton](#)

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Independent of the 7.5 million HIV-positive individuals in South Africa, 11 million sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are recorded every year in South Africa. So this country has 18.5 million active STIs annually, which means that almost one out of every three of us is affected and infected.



Source: Supplied. Alex Schmid, founder of Contro.

Another fact is that 40% of men under the age of 40 have erectile dysfunction, and 50% of diabetic men will also experience erectile dysfunction during their lifetime. And let's not ignore the 1.2 million unintended pregnancies that occur every year here.

Embarrassment, shame, and high and hidden costs are significant barriers to accessing sexual-health information and treatment. This can now be easily solved with Contro - a new online prescription and delivery service, making sexual-health- and confidence products easily accessible to anyone in South Africa,

Contro offers a range of services, including once-off treatments and subscriptions, which allow users to access their everyday, chronic medication without having to continually visit the doctor or collect prescriptions from the pharmacy. These services include birth control, erectile dysfunction treatment and hair-loss treatment.

We speak to Alex Schmid, founder of Contro about getting his telehealth platform for sexual healthcare services off the ground.

What inspired you to start Contro?

I actually got the idea from my ex-girlfriend, she had a frustrating experience obtaining her contraceptive pill. As she'd just moved to Cape Town she had to see a new doctor who during her consult, insinuated that it may be "time to start a family" even though she was only approaching 25 - this didn't go down well.

She then went to fill her prescription at the local pharmacy and was subjected to similar comments again, but this time in public. When she told me about her experience and the whole process of travelling to the doctor's offices, sitting in waiting rooms, and standing in pharmacy queues combined with all the expenses, I asked, "Why can't you just do this online?" her answer made the light bulb go off.

Although she had given me the idea, the drive to turn it into a reality came from a strong pull to come back to SA and make a difference at home. South Africa as we all know is struggling and access to healthcare is a right that is fast becoming a pipe dream for many South Africans, either because private healthcare is too expensive or public healthcare facilities are too dysfunctional to attain treatment. Our goal at Contro is to bridge the gap between both healthcare sectors, starting with the vertical of sexual health.

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■ ***In which countries are your company's services available?***

Currently, our services are nationwide across South Africa, and we have the ability to facilitate the delivery of treatment to urban and rural areas in South Africa as well as directly into township communities. We have international expansion plans in the pipeline but our goal is to establish Contro as the leading telehealth platform in South Africa first before we expand overseas.

■ ***Are there other companies that offer what you do, and what differentiates Contro?***

There are others that offer somewhat similar services, but none offer the full end-to-end service of virtual consultations, chronic prescription management and free nationwide delivery across South Africa (within one to three business days). We accept both cash-paying and medical-aid customers for all of our services.

We currently offer six treatment services, including birth control, erectile dysfunction, STI treatment and more. However, we have plans to launch over 50 treatment services through our platform over the coming year, plus we're close to launching testing services as well to round off our platform as a one-stop healthcare platform for all your needs.

■ ***How do you go about ensuring the products you offer are top quality?***

Contro does not produce or sell medication, nor do we supply medication directly to our customers. That part of the process is handled by our partner pharmacy. Contro is simply a platform that centralises and facilitates the process of obtaining treatment services for specific conditions currently within the realm of sexual health. This includes the ability to access a licensed and registered partner doctor for virtual consultation services regarding a specific treatment or condition, followed by the delivery of the prescribed medication by our partner pharmacy. Think of us as Uber for healthcare.

■ ***What have sales at Contro revealed in terms of who is making use of the services, and how many young people are tapping into the portal? What impact does this mean for society in terms of prevention of unplanned pregnancies, abortions and STDs?***

Our customer base is extremely diverse, we have treated individuals from Clifton to Khayelitsha, Sandton to Diepsloot, and from the Western Cape to Limpopo. What we've learned through our short history is that sexual health conditions and

infections certainly do not discriminate and we have a range of clients who have utilised our service. In terms of age groups utilising our service, again extremely diverse and subject to the specific condition they are seeking treatment for. We are finding many students, and young people are making use of our platform, but so are individuals up to the age of 80.

To date, we have facilitated treatment to over 3,000 individuals and overseen the delivery of over 10,000 prescriptions across South Africa. Our impact while still small has certainly helped change the lives of thousands of South Africans as well as given many the opportunity of choice. Our goals are much larger and we will continue to work to contribute towards the prevention of unplanned pregnancies and the treatment of STI's plus many more conditions that plague our communities.

■ **How is Contro changing the narrative around contraception?**

Contraception is a choice, and all women in South Africa and abroad should have the opportunity to have a choice to protect their futures when they choose to procreate. Contro is changing the narrative around contraception by providing a safe and convenient platform for patients to access sexual health services. Our online consultations and discreet delivery of medication make it easier for people to access contraceptive services without the stigma and barriers associated with in-person consultations.

Contro offers over 30 brands of contraceptives including the birth control pill, patch, and ring. By increasing access to a range of contraceptive methods, we are empowering individuals to make informed choices about their sexual health and reproductive rights.

“ *#Telemedicine services have the potential to bridge [#healthcare](#) gaps, enhance access to quality care, and promote patient-centred [#healthcare](#) models in [#Africa](#), ultimately contributing to a healthier and more equitable society.*”

(Via [@DadaBen_](#)) <https://t.co/lftvHxxGfE>— Contro (@Contro_za) [May 29, 2023](#) ”

Our partner doctor network is staffed by medical professionals who are trained in providing sensitive and non-judgmental care, creating a safe and welcoming environment for individuals to discuss their needs and concerns. Our goal is to break down barriers to access by making it easy and comfortable to seek out sexual health services.

Overall, Contro is helping to change the narrative around contraception by providing a platform that is accessible, convenient, and stigma-free. By increasing access to contraception and promoting reproductive health equity and autonomy, we are working towards a future where everyone has the ability to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. Our goal with our birth control service is to ensure individuals have the opportunity to take control of their sexual health, bodies and futures and our contraception service achieves exactly that.

■ **How would you like to see the service grow?**

Ideally, very fast, as this will mean we're able to provide greater access to treatment services for more South Africans. Our sole focus now is to scale our platform in terms of service offerings (namely treatments) as well as by onboarding and treating more customers. Our goal is to create greater access to healthcare for all South Africans and our full-service healthcare platform at scale can achieve that milestone.

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

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