

# Tele-consultation in COVID-19 Era: Pros and Cons

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## ABSTRACT

The corona virus disease (COVID-19) caused by SARS-CoV-2 has been declared as global pandemic. This outbreak has brought global health emergency with the diversion of healthcare resources in addressing corona virus threat. With the rapid rise in the cases of COVID-19 all over the world, continuing and maintaining face to face consultations has become too risky for both the patients and the doctors. So as an alternative, tele-consultation over phones has come out to be the simplest solution at the period of such pandemic crises. Tele-consultation seems to be the cheapest means of communication along with availing advantage of health care services when there is utmost need of maintaining social distancing to limit the risk of such a deadly virus transmission. Tele-consultation on one hand serves though can act as an immediate stress reliever for the patients and their families but, due to its short comings in terms of lack of personal contact and physical examination, it may not alleviate the patient's concerns completely.

**Key Words:** Tele-consultation, health care, COVID-19, pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

Tele-Consultation refers to the use of tele-communications technology, for the purpose of diagnosis or treatment of a patient at a site remote from the patient or primary physician<sup>1</sup>. The aim of tele-consultation is to virtually eliminate the geographic separation between and the patient seeking medical consultation and the

health care professional, while either of them being at different location.

The corona virus disease (COVID-19) caused by SARS-CoV-2 has been declared as global pandemic. It has been shown that SARS-Cov-2 usually gets transmitted via droplet or direct contact and hence clustering of cases among family members and community is common<sup>2,3,4</sup>. With the rapidly rising number of COVID-19 patients attending the hospitals for their diagnosis and treatment there is increased risk of nosocomial infections.<sup>2</sup> There is increased risk of virus transmission not only to the frontline health care workers but also to patients with different medical conditions visiting the hospitals.

During this period of COVID-19 pandemic, the healthcare sector is already experiencing the shortage of healthcare work force as the outbreak has led to diversion of healthcare resources in addressing corona virus threat. Moreover, in many parts of the world, there is an acute shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), and other resources required for health care workers. If in such a situation, medical doctors and professionals themselves are exposed to the virus and need to be taken off for treatment or quarantined in large numbers, it would lead to a in disaster for already stressed health care administration and delivery.

Moreover, as a result of COVID-19 imposed social distancing, quarantine measures and lock-downs, the working of

many hospitals and outpatient departments and also clinics has been severely restricted and limited. In the prevailing conditions, continuing and maintaining direct face to face consultations has become too risky for both the patients and the doctors because of the fear of virus transmission and hence are being limited. Consequently, a large number of patients with poor health conditions, and with acute or chronic diseases in need of medical help, are at loss. However, despite all the limitations involved, health care services cannot be entirely be denied to the needful patients especially considering the fact that mortality is higher in COVID-19 patients in areas with low access to healthcare facilities as compared to areas with high access<sup>5</sup>.

Using Tele-consultation, the much needed medical consultation can be provided over a phone, reducing the number of patients and their attendants visiting the health care facilities and hence the personal interactions. During such period of pandemic when people usually become uncertain, feel depressed, confused, angry

along with the constant fear of infection, tele-consultation is a useful tool<sup>6</sup>. Using tele-consultation services, patients and their families can have easy access to the medical consultation and required information and knowledge, well on time and thus, decreasing level of anxiousness among the patients and their families<sup>7</sup>. It is also the safe and effective way of providing a virtual barrier for the medical workforce, thereby, mitigating the risk of virus transmission to them.

To enable tele-consultation services during the pandemic period, specific doctors from concerned specialities can be enrolled in a roster and assigned duties on specific days and working hours and are provided designated phones numbers on which they take all the calls and try to solve the patient's issues and give them medical advice also. The doctors need not be present on-site at the hospital premises, but availability to their access, as scheduled or planned, must be ensured.



Figure-1. Ways in which tele-consultation could help during the COVID-19 pandemic

### Advantages of tele-consultation

1. Provides consultation which would have not been possible otherwise during the pandemic.
2. Reducing the burden on hospitals and clinics and allows efficient use of manpower at hospitals.
3. Treatment monitoring and review can be done even at times when both doctors and

patients are quarantined at their respective places.

4. Provides safety to both the patients and health care providers along with exchange of information.
5. Satisfaction of the patients even at the periods of lockdown when it is impossible to rush to the hospitals.

6. It is the simplest means of communication and availing services free of charge.
7. Does not require PPE (personal protective equipment) utilization and is also time saving as there is no need to wear and remove PPE before providing services.
8. Patients even from remote areas can take consultation without their physical presence.
9. Allows maintenance of patient privacy.

#### **Disadvantages:**

1. Patient may not get satisfied on phone calls without face to face consultation.
2. Lack of physical examination and missing many findings.
3. Compliance of patients to medical advice cannot be checked/ ensured

#### **CONCLUSION**

Tele-consultation during present COVID-19 pandemic can be a useful tool in reducing the burden of exposure among both doctors and the patients attending the healthcare institutes. By reducing the need for unnecessary travelling and reducing the number of patients visiting the health institutes, tele-consultation can help to reduce crowding, maintain social distancing and reduces the risk of nosocomial infections among patients. It can also act as an indirect shield, protecting the health care staff at the institutes and at the same time providing required medical consultation services focusing on personal care with the use of limited available resources. It can therefore act as a stress reliever to those involved in providing essential as well as specialist health care services and also to those seeking health care services during the periods of pandemic. Moreover, tele-consulting can also help to reduce the involved costs in terms of time and financial burden incurred by patients towards travelling and also by healthcare institutes on protective measures and equipment. So, considering the benefits tele-consultation has to offer, it should be implemented with

proper planning where ever feasible during the period of pandemics like the present one.

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