



## To Analyse Communication Pattern And Satisfaction Of Individuals Opting For Teleconsultation During Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

**Background:** Corona virus disease was declared as a Global Pandemic by WHO on 11th march 2020.<sup>1</sup> India turned out to be one of the worst hit countries by the pandemic. Nationwide as well as individual states have imposed lockdown in phases as preventive measure. Teleconsultation played a very crucial part in this situation. The reduction in doctor patient visit played an essential role in breaking the chain of transmission of Covid19. Though telemedicine has been used sporadically in India even before 2020, the current pandemic has made it an important aspect in its prevention. Hence, Permission for teleconsultation was given to registered medical practitioners by releasing guidelines dated 25<sup>th</sup> march 2020 by board of Governors in supersession of the medical council of India.<sup>2</sup> Though teleconsultation is the need of the hour, it cannot replace the real time interaction between doctor and patient.

**Aim & Objective:** To analyse the impact of teleconsultation on doctor and patient communication and the overall perception of patients towards teleconsultation.

**Material & Method:** Cross sectional descriptive study was done by 20 points questionnaires handed to total 200 individuals who opted for teleconsultation, out of which only 194 responded.

**Results:** Majority of individual responded that communicating with the doctor was not difficult and 70% individual felt that it is better way of getting treatment during pandemic times and 76% would recommend this to others as well.

**Conclusion:** Teleconsultation is a very effective way to prevent the transmission of covid 19 and the communication between doctor and patient is not affected much. Majority of patients were satisfied with this experience.

**Keywords:** teleconsultation, pandemic , COVID-19, communication

### Introduction

According to WHO, the ideal doctor: patient ratio should be 1:1000.<sup>3</sup> In India, it is one doctor for every 1511 Patient.<sup>4</sup> This reflects poorly on accessibility of health services to large population in the country. This disparity is further deepened by the ongoing pandemic, where a large section of population is deprived of basic health care facility due to imposition of lockdown time to time. Around 70% of population which lives in rural India are mostly affected in the current scenario.<sup>5</sup> Teleconsultation is

one of the important aspects which should be explored to narrow down this mismatch.

In India, it was first started in 2001 by ISRO (Indian space research organisation) which connected Apollo Hospital Chennai to a rural hospital in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>6</sup> Many other governments as well as private sector health care facilities in India use teleconsultation in various forms. But the ongoing pandemic has made it need of the hour, especially for the Covid 19 positive patients and their family members/contacts in home isolation /quarantine. The

hospitals and clinics acted like super spreaders. For those who had mild/ moderate symptoms and where emergency treatment was not required at that moment, teleconsultation played an absolutely vital role. Keeping this in mind, the ministry of health and family welfare, India had issued a practice guideline for telemedicine by allopathic doctors on 25<sup>th</sup> march, 2020.<sup>7</sup> This guideline is presented by board of governors in supersession of the medical council of India, prepared in partnership with NITI Aayog.

According to this guideline, “teleconsultation is defined as the delivery of health care services, where distance is a critical factor, by all health care professionals using information and communication technologies for the exchange of valid information for diagnosis, treatment and prevention of diseases and injuries, research and evaluation, and for the continuing education of health care providers, all in the interests of advancing the health of individuals and their communities”<sup>8</sup>

The mode of communication can be via video, audio as well as text or chat based in all formats of social media. Teleconsultation guidelines do not apply for surgical procedure and for consultation outside India.

The patient can contact any registered medical practitioner (RMP) duly registered with MCI/ state medical councils. The consent is implied. The RMP is authorised to charge a consultation fee. Both the patients as well as the doctor has authority to discontinue the process at any point of time. The practitioner is always asked to display their registration number so that it can be cross verified. It is also mandatory to prescribe in a specific format and use a digital signature.

The privacy of the patient should always be protected. Follow up to 6 months is allowed but after that in- person consultation is mandatory. If the physician feels that physical examination is absolutely necessary, they can stop the teleconsultation right away and ask for in person visit. Maintenance of records is also important like keeping call logs, emails, chats, videos, patients records, diagnostic reports and various relevant data.

This use of digital / tele platform for medical consultation can have both advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantage being able to receive medical advice from home. Keeping pandemic in

mind, there are numerous patients, in fact majority, who can be treated from home by keeping in home isolation or quarantine facility.

This not only removes the hassle of travelling but most importantly breaks the covid 19 transmission chain. In addition to that, curbs the possibility of health care workers from getting infected themselves. Majority of covid 19 cases are mild / moderate<sup>9</sup>. They can be managed from home by making the patient / family members to follow the therapy intently and keeping a watchful eye on worsening of the condition and then referring to hospital if required. One of the advantages are also that diagnostic reports were commuted to the health care provider and review of the medication as per reports was done quite early.

So, the directions given to the patient should be clear and comprehensible. The digital/ tele platform can be challenging here as sometimes lack of clarity can lead to undesirable consequences. Sometimes, the outline of therapy, the name of the drug, dosage forms, time of intake and many such small but important details are misread or misinterpreted by the patients’ side. In covid 19 especially, following the right therapy at right time is highly important as the severity of the disease is completely dependent on timely management and if failed to be done, the disease worsens and need for hospitalisation arises. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of covid 19 in April/ May 2021 has highlighted the fact that the likelihood for severity of covid 19 increased by the new strains overburdened the healthcare system. It is also required that the general population should receive proper advice from healthcare professionals about basics in hygiene and prevention measures, immune system, diet etc time to time in the wake of pandemic.

As this is a relatively new platform for availing health care services, it is imperative to learn about the perception of patients towards teleconsultation. Most of the times, the patient often feels dissatisfied psychologically by the lack of patient to caregiver interaction face to face, empathy and emotional support.<sup>10</sup> The effect of emotional support on patient satisfaction is more significant than that of informational support.<sup>11</sup>

As there is no doctor to patient visit face to face and physical examination, the patient might feel a little discontent. The whole process of consultation feels

rather incomplete and artificial. It is also important to know how different the view is compared to the conventional patient clinician interaction, in order to bring about any refinement in the current process. The detailed interaction about the past history and other relevant medical information about the patient can be missed by the physician as well. Hence, the entire process of getting consultation, medication and procurement of drugs should be assessed to know about the profitability of the situation.

In this article, it is tried to obtain a viewpoint about teleconsultation by questionnaire containing 20 questions. 200 patients who opted for teleconsultation

were handed out this questionnaire and asked for the feedback based on google forms. The objective to carry out this study is to know how effective the communication is between the doctor and the patients and to analyse any gaps.

**Material and method:**

200 patients who were home isolated and opted for teleconsultation during covid 19 pandemic from march 2020 to august 2021 were handed out questionnaires which have 21 questions with choices. Out of 200 ,194 individuals participated. Consent was duly taken. Patients are asked to answer the question according to the experience they had.

FEEDBACK QUESTIONS:	RESPONSES :			
1. Why did you opt for teleconsultation?	a). I was Covid positive with mild symptoms	b). Covid negative/unsure but I had other symptoms	c). Asked for a family member/ friend/ other	
2. Were you asked for fees?	a) yes	b) no		
3. Was it easy/difficult to connect to the doctor?	a) Yes	b) no		
4. Were you able to explain your complains to the doctor fully?	a) yes	b) no		
5. Was the doctor able to understand your complains?	a) Definitely	b) most likely	c) less likely	d) did not understand
6. Did the doctor ask you more about your past history/ comorbidities	a) Yes	b) No		

etc?				
7. Did the doctor ask about your body weight, drug allergy before prescribing any medicine?	a) yes	b) no		
8. In what form prescription was issued?	a) printed	b) handwritten	c) dictated by the doctor, written by me	d) none
9. Did the doctor fully explain the dosage form, time of intake and duration of drug to be taken?	a) Yes	b) No		
10. Did he ask you to get any diagnosis done? if yes, did he explain the rationale behind this?	a) Yes	b) No		
11. Did the pharmacist understand the drugs given by the doctor?	a) yes	b) no		
12. Did your condition improve or worsen after the treatment?	a) Yes	b) no		

13. Where you required to go to hospital?	a) yes	b) no	
14. How many times did you call/ texted / video called / emailed (contacted) the doctor in your course of treatment?	a) Just one time	b) 2- 10 times	c) >10 times
15. Did the doctor explain you about the side effects / adverse events related to the prescribed treatment?	a) yes	b) no	
16. Were you advised about diet/ hygiene measures?	a) Yes	b) no	
17. Did the consultant advice you about vaccines?	a) yes	b) no	
18. How satisfactory was your interaction with the doctor?	a) Not at all	b) very less	c) satisfactory enough d) highly satisfactory <sup>19</sup>
19. Is teleconsultation a better way of receiving healthcare facilities	a) Yes	b) no	

compared to clinic visits during these times?			
20. Will you recommend teleconsultation to others?	a) yes	b) no	

**Result:**

194 individuals out of 200 responded to the questionnaire. When asked about reason for opting for teleconsultation, maximum (44.8%) asked for some other family member or friend, 23.2% said they were covid positive themselves with mild symptoms and 14.4% said they were covid negative but had other symptoms. 77.8% were not asked for fees. 88.7% people said it was easy to connect to the doctor. Majority of people around 87.1% were able to explain their complains to the doctor fully and 9.3% said they couldn't explain their complains to the doctor. Remaining were unsure. 58.8% said that the doctor definitely understood their complains. 83.5% said that they were asked about past history and other disease, 12.4 % said they were not asked about that. Majority, 80.9% were asked about their body weight, drug allergy, current medication before prescribing any medication.

Prescription was issued in handwritten (40.2%), dictated by doctor (31.4%), printed (22.7%) forms. 91.8% said that the doctor fully explained the dosage, time, duration of intake of drug. 75.3% said that the doctor asked them to get investigations done and 91.2% said that their condition improved after treatment. 91.2% said that the pharmacist understood the drugs given by the doctor. 86.1% individuals were not required to go to the hospital and 13.4% said they went to the hospital and remaining said that hospital facility was not available to them. 42.8% said that they called just once, 33% called 2-10 times and 19.6% daily. 65.5 % said that the doctor explained them about side effect/ adverse effect related to the prescribed treatment. 26.8% said they were not explained about side effects and remaining were unsure. 83.5% were advised about diet/ hygiene and

79.9% were asked about vaccines. 39.7% were highly satisfied by their interaction and 50% said they were satisfied enough; rest were very less or not at all satisfied. 69.6% feel that teleconsultation is better way to receive healthcare services during these covid 19 times. 11.3 % disagree and 19.1 % were unsure. 76.3% individuals would recommend teleconsultation to others and 16.5% said they will not. Rest were unsure.

**Discussion:**

Covid 19 has changed the perception of healthcare services. The responsibility of treatment is not limited only to the patient but has now extended to their contacts as well. Breaking of transmission chain has emerged to be the most effective measure in covid 19 prevention.

Findings from this study highlight that teleconsultation is important and can be adapted to support the treatment of patients during and after the pandemic. This study shows that the quality of teleconsultations is not inferior to the quality of consultation during a doctor to patient visit. The patients felt overall satisfaction regarding exchanging communication with their doctors during teleconsultation as well.

Majority patients said that it was easier to connect to the patient and majority were able to explain their complains to the doctor. Majority were asked about the other relevant parameters related to any conventional medical check-up like past history, other illnesses, drug allergy etc. Also, the whole process of prescribing the drug, procuring them by pharmacist and the instructions regarding the drug was effectively communicated according to majority of patient. Hence, it can be said that their was not much of communication gap between the two parties.

Majority have responded that their condition improved after the treatment, which indicates that teleconsultation can be a great asset to the healthcare facilities during testing times like pandemic. Not only one can trust on telecommunication for deliverance of effective medical management but the spread of deadly microorganisms can also be contained. This is immensely beneficial to the society especially the health care providers.

Also, some really important factors related to covid19 like vaccines, sanitisation, diet, hygiene etc were discussed by the doctors as well as responded by the individuals. This also is very much needed as it is important to get right information from right people to increase awareness and avoid any unnecessary rumours.

Majority of people answered that they were satisfied by the interaction and would recommend teleconsultation to others. Hence, we can conclude that overall perception and attitude towards teleconsultation is positive in society and keeping future pandemics in mind we can strive to develop a better experience.

Comparison with traditional medicine: History taking, self-monitoring and investigation report analysis are better than clinic consultation. Inspection, palpation is less effective whereas percussion and auscultation are not possible on virtual platform.

### Conclusion

Teleconsultation was an effective means to acquire healthcare facilities during covid 19 pandemic. The process was smooth and there were no communication hurdles for majority. Overall, the sense of satisfaction of majority of individuals were good. Telemedicine helps maintaining physical distancing (relevant in current pandemic). It ensures timely follow up, allows proper utilization of scant medical resources and makes health care accessible, affordable and efficient.

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