

Telemedicine: first steps in a north-eastern Italian region during first year of pandemic

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Background:

Covid-19 pandemic imposed searching for innovative solutions to ensure safety access to outpatient services. In March 2020 first cases were reported in Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) region, in Italy; in April 2020 FVG included teleconsultation in the healthcare offer. This study evaluated in-presence medical consultations (IPCs) delivered in FVG before and after first cases reported in region and correlation between IPCs, teleconsultations and new admissions to Covid-19 wards during pandemic.

Methods:

IPCs were analysed dividing in pre (February 1st, 2019-February 29th, 2020) and post (March 1st, 2020-March 31st, 2021) Covid-19 emergency period and comparing mean months values with t-test. IPCs and teleconsultations delivered during emergency (March 1st, 2020-March 31st, 2021) were divided in months and correlated with new admissions to Covid-19 wards in the same period with Pearson test.

Results:

IPCs delivered in pre-Covid-19 period compared with post were 1,105,823 vs 973,350 (-12%), peaking in October (98,980 vs 86,821; -12.3%) and minimum in April (82,061 vs 61,523; -25.1%). Pre-Covid-19 mean IPCs were significantly different compared to post (85,063 vs 74,873; $p=.003$). Focusing on emergency period, IPCs were negatively related to teleconsultations (973,350 vs 2140; $r=-.43$; $p=.13$). The negative correlation found between new admissions to Covid-19 wards (9154) and IPCs was weak and not significant ($r=-.12$;

$p=.69$), while a positive and significant correlation was found between teleconsultations and new admissions to Covid-19 wards ($r=.59$; $p=.03$).

Conclusions:

Results showed a significant reduction of post-Covid-19 IPCs compared to pre and a significant correlation between teleconsultations and new admissions to Covid-19 wards in FVG during first year of Covid-19 emergency. Contagion containment measures and fear probably influenced access to outpatient services while teleconsultation should be considered as an alternative to face-to-face during pandemic period.

Key messages:

- A reduction of in-presence medical consultations was found in a north-eastern Italian region during first year of pandemic.
- Teleconsultation could be a valid solution in case of increasing Covid-19 hospitalizations.