

A pilot study on the perspectives of pediatric ophthalmologists and their patients towards online consultation during COVID-19 lockdown in India

Dear Editor:

Tele-ophthalmology for individualized patient care was un-common until recent national lock-down when regulatory and practice guidelines were made available.^[1,2] We present the perspectives of the pediatric ophthalmologists (PO) and their patients towards tele-ophthalmology, captured in the initial 6 weeks of this new era of legalized Telehealth.

A 15-item questionnaire for PO was administered through google forms and an eleven item questionnaire for patients was administered via a telephonic-call [Table 1]. All the patients were treated by chief author. Teleconsultations and online payments were legally compliant.

Survey of PO: Out of 60, 26 replied. 16 were females. Mean age was 37.1 years and 50% were in private-practice. The average experience of the respondents was 6.5 years. Eleven had started teleconsultations and 16 were aware of the regulations. Only 7 knew how to set up teleophthalmology practice. Twenty five favored the teleconsultation for non-vision threatening

eye problems [Table 2]. An econsultation was preferred over video-consultation. Online-chat and telephones were not favored. The recommended fees for online consultations was 440.00 ₹. The major concerns were lack of comprehensiveness, treatment compliance, overuse and medicolegal. Twenty-five respondents wanted to practice tele-ophthalmology.

Survey of patients: Out of 36, twenty replied. Twelve had video-consultations and 8 had econsultation/s. Nine patients had consulted for the first time. Mean age was 10.5 years. Mean satisfaction score was 92%. Seven desired to avail tele-consultation even after lockdown. All the patients felt helped and rated the reliability of diagnosis 88%. Eighteen recommended teleconsultation for eye emergencies during the lockdown [Table 2]. No patient was aware of government regulations. Recommended fees was 400.00₹.

The Cronbach alpha of the questionnaire for PO was 0.4, and that of the patients was 0.8. This pilot study demonstrated the need of tele-ophthalmology in pediatric eye care. Further studies with larger sample are needed.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

Table 1: Questionnaires used for the assessment of the perspectives of the pediatric ophthalmologists and their patients towards individualised patient care using tele-ophthalmology

Questionnaire for Pediatric ophthalmologists.

- 1 Please mention your age in years
- 2 Please mention your gender
- 3 Describe your role as pediatric ophthalmologist
- 4 How many years have you been in the practice?
- 5 Do you offer teleophthalmology services in your practice?
- 6 Are you aware of the Indian teleophthalmology or telemedicine practice guidelines published by the medical council or health ministry or AIOS?
- 7 Do you know how to set up a teleophthalmology practice compliant with the current regulations?
- 8 In which situations would you recommend a teleophthalmology consultation to the patients?
- 9 What could be the other possible indications for use of teleophthalmology in your practice?
- 10 In which situations would you strongly discourage the use of teleophthalmology?
- 11 Which type of virtual consultation would you prefer with your patients?
- 12 What is your current consultation fees for clinic consultation?
- 13 What should be the optimal fees for your online consultation?
- 14 What are your major concerns regarding integration of teleophthalmology in your practice?
- 15 Would you consider integration of teleophthalmology services in your practice?

Questionnaire for the patients

- 1 Which mode of online consultation did you avail?
- 2 Which type of consultation was this?
- 3 What is the age of the patient?
- 4 What is your overall satisfaction with the recent online consultation? [0 being extremely unsatisfied and 5 being extremely satisfied]
- 5 Would you be willing to resume the same mode of consultation in future?
- 6 How reliable you felt about utilising this mode of consultation for the current problem?
- 7 Did the consultation help address your problem?
- 8 In which situations do you advise to use online consultation?
- 9 What are the other situations where you recommend online consultation?
- 10 Are you aware of any strict guidelines that doctors follow for online consultation pertinent to quality of care, patient safety and confidentiality of data?
- 11 What should be the optimum charges for an online consultation?

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Table 2: Recommended indications for teleconsultations in pediatric ophthalmology

Recommendations by the Pediatric Ophthalmologists	
Indication	Numbers (%) of respondents
For eye emergencies during the lockdown	18 (90%)
Follow-up of the patients	23 (88.5%)
For patient education	11 (42.3%)
For second opinion	10 (38.5%)
Additional recommendations	
When the primary ophthalmologist was travelling.	
For bed ridden patients.	
For patients who live at far distance who need frequent follow ups.	
Follow up of a patient with recent extraocular surgery.	
For any eye emergency where local doctor is just not available.	
Recommendations by the Patients	
Indication	Numbers (%) of respondents
For eye emergencies during the lockdown	18 (90%)
For second opinion	7 (35%)
For patient education	3 (15%)
Follow-up of the patients	2 (10%)

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