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Comparing patient experience between telemedicine and traditional urology visits during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction & Objectives: The global COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the greatest challenges for healthcare institutions throughout the world. Besides combatting the virus, hospitals also had to cope with pressing disruptions in the healthcare delivery for non COVID-19 conditions. As a result, the role of telemedicine has become even more important during the pandemic as it enables the delivery of care in the midst of social distancing. Singapore has also been battling the exponential increase in COVID-19 cases since its first reported case on 23 January 2020. It mandated a declaration of DORSON (Disease Outbreak Response System Condition) Orange status from 7 February 2020 and stricter lockdown measures from 7 April 2020. To stem the spread of disease, non-urgent healthcare visits to the hospitals were postponed and telemedicine was recommended as a means to provide continuity of care. The aim of the study is to evaluate patient experience during the upscaling of telemedicine use in an ambulatory urology population when COVID-19 lockdown measures were in place.

Materials & Methods: Between 2 April 2020 and 16 June 2020, Urology patients who underwent Phone Consultations (PC) were invited to complete an 18-item telemedicine-specific Patient Experience Survey (PES) via telephone interview. Patients who had face-to-face (F2F) consultations in the same time period were surveyed through an existing in-use PES. Patient experience scores were analyzed and compared.

Results: A total of 102 telemedicine patients and 72 patients with F2F consultations completed the surveys. Mean (SD) overall satisfaction scores, out of 10, were 7.94 (1.32) for PC and 8.46 (1.42) for F2F consultations, ($p=0.015$). A smaller proportion of patients with PC compared to F2F consultations (80.4% vs. 95.8%) would recommend this clinic to friends ($p=0.003$). Perceived benefits for telemedicine patients include convenience, mean (SD) score 4.08 (0.89), mean (SD) time savings 140.3 (149.9) minutes and cost savings of SG\$15.40 (52.41). 37 (36.3%) patients disagreed or strongly disagreed that PC was preferred over F2F consultations.

Conclusions: Patient experience scores were generally high for both PC and F2F consultations, although the slightly lower mean overall score for PC reached statistical significance. Analysis of qualitative questions from the telemedicine PES revealed areas of improvements to be made. Future work should include validation of the telemedicine patient experience survey, as well as analysing which subgroup of patients and at what point during the patient encounter will telemedicine be the most suitable.