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Lessons learned with remote research among older adults during COVID-19, a qualitative reflection

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Introduction & Objectives: Remote research methodology promises to deliver many benefits such as convenience, cost savings and efficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the trend toward telemedicine and remote research. However, the remote setting presents a unique set of challenges for conducting research. We sought to systematically assess our experience in conducting remote research in one multi-institutional prospective and longitudinal study using qualitative methods.

Materials & Methods: Co-Tele-Surge is an all-remote study that aims to describe the perioperative cognitive trajectories of older adults (65 and older) who undergo general anesthesia with a one year follow-up. Concurrently we are conducting the present study using the sample of individuals who either withdrew, declined or were ineligible for participation in Co-Tele-Surge. We use a modified qualitative descriptive analytic strategy as described by Neergaard et al. (2009). This approach seeks to identify central themes and subthemes for non-participation among patients who withdrew, declined or were ineligible. (protocol pending in clinicaltrials.gov)

Results: This study analyzes data from 123 individuals who declined to participate (46), were ineligible (55) or withdrew from participation (22) from the Co-TELE-SURGE study. A major theme present in all cohorts included difficulty with technology [28% of declined, 18% of ineligible, 36% of withdrawn]. Other predominant themes included; change in clinical course (23% of withdrawn), loss of interest (18% of withdrawn), uninterested

(70% of declined) and communication (35% of ineligible). Table 1 demonstrates the predominant themes and subthemes of each cohort.

Table 1: Central Themes and Subthemes for Non-Participation

| Cohort | Themes | Subthemes |
|-------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Withdrawn | Barriers to Technology | Difficulty accessing support person Unfamiliarity with device Difficulty completing test |
| | Change in Clinical Course | Concurrent hospitalization and/or illness Surgery no longer required |
| | Loss of Interest | Felt computer based test lacked purpose No longer interested |
| Declined | Barriers to Technology | Unfamiliarity with device Poor internet access |
| | Uninterested | Conflicting priorities Felt study did not apply to them Patient unwilling to participate |
| Ineligible | Barriers to Technology | No access to electronic device Low socioeconomic status |
| | Communication | Difficulty communicating in English Unable to contact patient |

Conclusions: The predominant theme for non-participation with remote research in older adults was barriers to technology across all 3 patient groups. Limitations of this study include whether thematic saturation was attained with current sampling. Understanding barriers to participation can help inform the design of future research to better retain and encourage participation in future remote studies involving older adults.