

Telehealth: Is It a Post-COVID Reality in Early Diagnosis of Oral Cancer?

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Dear Editor,

The emergence of the Coronavirus pandemic ruffled the healthcare system all over the world and precipitated an expeditious shift from conventional healthcare to telemedicine. Telehealth has been extensively employed in various fields of medicine in view of its usability, accessibility, interoperability, and safety in extending standard healthcare services at the time of COVID-19 pandemic. The field of cancer care has been tremendously affected due to COVID-19 curtailment. Highly invasive cancers like oral carcinoma demand early screening and diagnosis to restrict further metastasis and subdue the fatality rate. In this regard, telehealth technology offers propitious results in early detection and commencement of appropriate treatment strategies in oral cancer. Keeping in view the successful outcome of this technological intervention under unfavorable circumstances, we emphasize the reliability and usability of telehealth technology for oral cancer management in the years to come post COVID-19 pandemic.

The burden of oral cancer, which is ranked as one of the highly metastatic cancers, is increasing globally. In India, it is ranked 1st among men and 3rd among women.¹ Delay in diagnosis is believed to be the significant cause of treatment failure and poor survival rate.^{2,3} Frequent dental appointments assist in earlier diagnosis by evaluation of risk factors and examination of any potential changes in the oral cavity. Lockdown restrictions and forced quarantine of cancer patients, caregivers, and healthcare providers have hindered regular dental visits that are predisposed to negligence, late diagnosis, irregular follow-up, and inefficient treatment.^{4,5}

During the COVID-19 crisis, telehealth advancements have capacitated novel approaches for refining patient education, evaluation, support, communication, and decision-making at the time of medical therapy for acute and chronic ailments.^{6,7} Tele oncology and tele dentistry serve as a platform to deliver clinical service in terms of diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.^{2,7} Virtual visits via telehealth intervention greatly expedite emergency medical assistance, booked, and unbooked consultation for oral health.⁵ As it is crucial to identify any abnormal lesion that may develop into malignant transformation, tele screening is widely recognized as a reliable, safe method of detection.⁸ It also assists in facilitating virtual communication with a specialist for identification, report discussion, treatment decision, and continuous monitoring whenever face-to-face interactions are not possible.⁹

One of the significant obstacles that hinder the treatment process is the paucity of resources for oral chemotherapy. Discrepancy in resource allocation can be ameliorated by instituting telemedicine infrastructure. Laying the foundation for a novel initiative post-pandemic can be distinctly challenging.¹⁰ A

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meticulous analysis of various telehealth technologies exploring its applicability, accessibility, and acceptability for large-scale implementation is crucial. Furthermore, it becomes necessary to consider the cost-effectiveness and precision of service furnished by these technologies. Also, the impact can be analyzed only when substantial number of cases are detected and treated in accordance with telehealth strategy.¹¹

Telehealth technologies are best-suited alternatives to hospital-based oral cancer care and produce optimistic outcomes. Implementing these interventions post pandemic can offer personalized and patient-centered care that in turn facilitates better patient outcomes. Telehealth not only provides diagnostic and treatment benefits but has also proven to be efficacious in enhancing post-treatment quality of life. Hence, in a rapidly evolving technological era, an adaptation to more feasible smart automation tools not only during times of crisis but also, in the long run, will undoubtedly serve as a constructive approach to meet health needs.

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