

## TELEMEDICINE IN PANDEMIC TIMES, LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE.

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### Introduction

At the end of 2019, a novel coronavirus was identified as the cause of a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China. With a rapid global expansion, which in less than three months has been declared a pandemic, affecting more than 13 millions of people and a mortality close to 600,000 patients(1). According to the statistics of patients in need of hospital care described to the World Health Organization (WHO), the cases could collapse the hospital infrastructure in our country(2).

The rapid progression of the disease presents a real challenge for the whole world. As the usual capacity for citizen care is exceeded, health professionals and governments struggle(3). Changes in the way that health care is delivered during this pandemic are needed to reduce staff exposure to ill persons, preserve personal protective equipment and minimize the impact of patient surges on facilities. Telehealth services help provide necessary care to patients while minimizing the transmission risk of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, to healthcare personnel and patients.

One of the most important strategies to reduce and mitigate the advance of the epidemic is social distance measures; this is where telemedicine can help. The incorporation of telemedicine into routine medical care promises to be transformative. Using technology that already exists and devices that most people have in their homes, medical practice over the internet can result in faster diagnoses and treatments, increase the efficiency of care and reduce patient stress. Telemedicine is useful and makes easier and available to the patient-doctor communication, it should not be stopped when coronavirus is mitigated, a lot of diseases, cancer, diabetes, heart pathologies, chronic conditions and more are opportunities to put telemedicine for the services of daily clinical practice (4). Telemedicine can also provide easy medical access to patients who live in rural communities many miles from good health care. For many common health problems or follow-up care, an in-office doctor visit may not be needed. Telemedicine can additionally have a direct impact on flattening the demand curve for health

systems across the country, slowing its spread and transmission over an extended period.

The psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic must be also recognized, telemental health services, are necessary for the support of patients, family members, and health service providers during this pandemic(5). Psychological symptoms relating to COVID-19 have already been observed on a population level including anxiety-driven panic and paranoia about attending community events. In the absence of a medical cure for COVID-19, the global response is a simple public health strategy of isolation. While the primary intervention of isolation may well achieve its goals, it leads to reduced access to support from family and friends, and degrades normal social support systems and causes loneliness, and is a risk for worsening anxiety and depressive symptoms. If left untreated, these psychological symptoms may have long-term health effects on patients and require treatment adding to the cost burden of managing the illness.

This crisis presents unprecedented opportunities that should not be ignored without making progress(6). While telemedicine isn't perfect or suited to all patients and conditions, it helps bridge the gap. Times are chaotic, for all of us. Our health care systems struggle to provide the best care possible. Telemedicine has proven to be incredibly useful, and it is here to stay(7).

Not everything is bad we have learned and will continue learning lessons for the future. It is not the first pandemic to strike our world, nor will it be the last. Since the bubonic plague that devastated Europe, cholera, the Spanish flu, the influenza pandemic and the Ebola epidemic, have been and will be many epidemic outbreaks that we will have to face. The success as a society consists in our ability to turn them into opportunities to improve and reinvent our health system the expansion of telemedicine is undoubtedly the greatest benefit of this pandemic.

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