

TELEPSYCHIATRY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Dear editor,

The development of communication technologies provide new opportunities for remote counselling and treatment in healthcare. During the current, global pandemic of COVID-19, telemedicine is essential to ensure that patients have access to quality medical care. The advantages of telemedicine in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are many, but most of all they are related to the protection of people's health, their mental state and the provision of treatment in time. The use of telemedicine in psychiatry, according to some medical specialists, is a possible alternative for patients' access to quality health care. It is useful in many social environments with limited access to health care. Telepsychiatry improves integrated and patient-centered care by allowing the inclusion of mental health resources in the overall treatment of the patient (Rehman & Lela 2020).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, health professionals working in departments of psychiatry and psychology are called upon to use remote medical services because there are many patients in need of mental health care. The restrictions caused by the pandemic changing people's daily lives, and this is associated with additional stress and anxiety, which negatively affects their mental health. In situations like this, many mental disorders are exacerbated or new ones appear (He et al. 2021). Encouraging patients suffering from depression or schizophrenia to use virtual communication with family, friends or a medical specialist would prevent acute exacerbation of their illness.

Telepsychiatry usually uses the online interaction between a patient and a medical specialist, including videoconferencing or text messaging. The use of asynchronous telepsychiatry, in which a detailed interview with the patient is recorded on video and examined by a specialist afterwards, also proves the effectiveness of telepsychiatry. In addition, of face-to-face health care, the use of telepsychiatry in the treatment of mental health disorders shown a significant impact on crisis intervention, and suicide prevention. Organizations such as Crisis Text Line has incorporated text conversations into crisis therapy and opened up new resources available to people in mental health crises. This is especially important for the mental health of adolescents, as many teenagers are more likely to use text messages for

therapy than talking in person or over the phone (Nesmith 2018).

Despite the numerous advantages of telepsychiatry, there are also negative opinions among medical specialists who do not find with this method an opportunity for quality mental health care.

Due to nature of his illness, some groups of patients will not be able to adequately benefit from telemedicine services. Children and geriatric patients may have difficulties in remotely connecting to a specialist. Patients with acute symptoms, uncritical of themselves and dangerous to others, usually need to be hospitalized so outpatient treatment as telepsychiatry is not recommended in the acute period of the disease. For some distant and small settlements, telepsychiatry may appear as a convenient method for consultation and access to medical care, but due to the presence of factors such as lack of access to the Internet, this cannot be done. On the other hand, telepsychiatry can be difficult for some patients due to low computer literacy, age, or fears that they will not receive the necessary medical care. In this context telepsychiatry is suitable for follow-up care and can complement without replacing face-to-face meetings (Li et al. 2020).

All personal data must be processed and stored in strict accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). There is a suspicion of abuse for both parties, therefore the security of the IT platform when providing telepsychiatry services is of paramount importance. Additional assurance can be given to clinicians through appropriately developed legal and regulatory framework (O'Brien & McNicholas 2020).

Studies on patient satisfaction, quality of care, and economic efficiency show that patients are satisfied with telepsychiatry and it is comparable to face-to-face meetings. The method can be a cost-effective approach in increasing access to mental health care. Regarding the quality of health care, the reviewed data show that telepsychiatry is comparable to a classic method concerning the reliability of the assessment and effective treatment of many behavioral and mental disorders (Hubley et al. 2016).

Despite the proven benefits of classic face-to-face psychiatric examinations, new approaches for accessing those in need of psychiatric care should be sought, especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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