Telemedicine complements face-to-face clinical visits

Technology can help connect doctors, patients and caregivers, especially during a pandemic, but it cannot entirely replace physical consultation.

Madam A, 95, has been a patient for a while now. She has dementia and her disease has nearly progressed so severe stage.

Her children became progressively older and the illness. She has suffered quite a few falls in the past, but thankfully more that that can be prevented.

Her family is fully aware that she loses her independence and has been very supportive in ensuring that she maintains her independence as much as possible.

They employ creative means to take care of the house. She is aware of the house and its surroundings. She is also aware of the intercom system, which is her main source of communication.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit our shores last year, clinical services in the hospital had to be shifted and the telemedicine was introduced, leading to reduced exposure to patients.

Many of these patients were treated through telemedicine, which was a major push for virtual consultations to keep in touch with our patients.

While the concept was new, we found that it provided us with the much-needed opportunity to provide virtual consultation to older people.

However, there were challenges in implementing this technology, especially in terms of the family.

According to National Telemedicine Guidelines, established in the Ministry of Health, telemedicine is defined as a "systematic provision of health care services over physically separate environments via information and communication technologies that promote access to care, enhance care process efficiency, and improve health outcomes.

These include access to medical care, including data security and privacy issues, limitations to physical examination, and medical implications.

Guidelines are important in this area, as the decisions to hold and face-to-face consultation need to be made appropriately. Only in cases where something is significant does one need an in-person consultation.

Certain conversations, for example, talks of a sensitive nature and which are fairly brief, should be handled in the presence of a consultant. These consultations need to be handled adequately.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit our shores last year, clinical services in the hospital had to be shifted in order to maintain the health of the population. However, this new mode of care is not for everyone, especially the elderly.

A concerned caregiver of a person with dementia recently rang us up to arrange a telemedicine consultation. After further review of the case, we found that the patient was well enough to undergo a face-to-face consultation instead.

We also found that the patient's dementia could be beneficial in finding the right words. The patient was not able to accurately describe her symptoms, which is not uncommon.

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Although outpatient care has been fully resumed, telemedicine is here to stay, given clear benefits. However, it is not a replacement for face-to-face consultations, but rather an addition.

It will be good for everyone as we scale the peak of one of the new modes of care. Generally, patients will be delighted at the opportunities for telemedicine consultations if they are available.

However, patients who have not been offered the service, but are in need of it, will also approach their doctors and caregivers.