

Post Pandemic Era – Adopting Tele-dentistry

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Dentistry, the field of medicine where the communication sets standards for success. A continuous patient and dentist as well multidisciplinary dental communication leads to accuracy in diagnosis, increased efficiency as well as better patient satisfaction and long term positive outcomes. However the COVID-19 has brought a hindrance in the regular dental practice. The dental work demands a close proximity between the dentists with the patient which pitches them at a higher risk of being affected by the virus. Hence, international as well as national policy making associations and organizations have suggested only emergency and minimal aerosols generating treatment procedures.^{1,2} The dentists have almost been in hibernation, along with the waves of the pandemic and the constant lockdowns, carrying out free consultations for regular patients of their practices, through the phone and even chats. Can this be an opportunity to include tele-communication tools in routine dental practice?

The portals for communications have narrowed down and are usually more at the disposal of the urban areas. The rural areas have always received only basic care and minimal access to specialist dental health care, especially in this part of the subcontinent, even prior to the pandemic. It has however been noticed that at present, even the rural areas, have internet connections which can be used to their benefit. This opens a whole new prospect for the introduction of Tele-Dentistry in our regions. The country has seen a success with the telemedicine technology, where they have utilized modern technology for communication like internet, computers, mobile phones and many rural areas have benefitted from it.²

The SAARC e-Network Tele-Medicine project initiatives by the Government of India provides specialist healthcare

facilities and treatment to the people of all member SAARC countries and also shares expertise in medical knowledge among doctors of the SAARC countries. Tele medicine has been introduced in Nepal as well. The Government of Nepal, Ministry of Health and Department of Health Services have been providing telemedicine services. Their telemedicine center presently located in Patan Hospital is catering to 25 districts through Live Video Conferencing, Store and forward mechanism and Hello Swasthya. In addition the Nepal Research and Education Network (NREN) have also been providing telemedicine services since 2006 to the rural areas of Nepal with Kathmandu Model hospital as its medical partner.

The same approach can be adopted and implemented in dentistry in Nepal, with the collaboration with existing telemedicine providers as well as a collaborative initiation by the various dental associations and societies. There is an assurance of possibility of success in tele-dentistry as the pandemic has made internet access a necessity.^{3,4}

Tele-dentistry works on the simple concept of providing patients with dental care without physical visits, in the form of sharing photographs or videos of the offending tooth.¹ The dentist examines it and comes to a diagnosis. It can also help in multidisciplinary approach between dentists in an area with specialist elsewhere. Many trials have provided evidence of how tele-dentistry has improved access to specialist care, broadened benefits for both the family and the services providers with potential reduction of inappropriate referrals. Tele-dentistry can make valuable contributions to the delivery of dental care in both the private and public dental settings. Community Oral health Projects utilizing Tele-dentistry can be generated for better level of care in addition to the traditional model of oral health assessment. Tele-dentistry can be an emerging tool for integration of dental practice with virtual care that can change the approach to dental care services in the future.

There are newer vistas to open and broaden our horizon.

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