

PSG BULLETIN

Service with compassion to members and community

PHILIPPINE SOCIETY OF GASTROENTEROLOGY

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Teleconsultation During and After COVID-19 Community Quarantine

Community quarantine protocols to address the COVID-19 outbreak have severely restricted in-person medical consultation in the country. These unprecedented restrictions have highlighted the importance of telemedicine and teleconsultation, which should become part of mainstream medicine after the community quarantine is lifted and the pandemic is contained.

Telemedicine, a term coined in the 1970s, literally means “healing at a distance”. The World Health Organization (WHO) broadly defines telemedicine as “the delivery of health care services, where distance is a critical factor, by all health care professionals using information and communication technologies for the exchange of valid information for diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease and injuries, research and evaluation, and for the continuing education of health care providers, all in the interests of advancing the health of individuals and their communities.”¹

Teleconsultation, an aspect of telemedicine, is defined as any interactive real-time medical consultation between a non-medical consumer/patient and a health care professional, or among health care professionals, on an electronic device utilizing radio waves or the global network such as the Internet.²

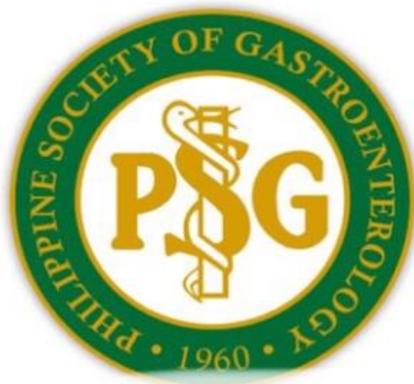
Teleconsultation: pros and cons

On March 28, 2020 the Department of Health and the National Privacy Commission released Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2020-0001 on the “Guidelines on the Use of Telemedicine in COVID-19 Response”. The guidelines aim “to enable patients to receive health services even while staying at home except for serious conditions, emergencies, or to avail of COVID-19-related health services as per standing protocols.”³

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, several apps have become popular teleconsultation tools among patients and physicians in the country. These include the telecommunications apps Messenger, Skype, Viber, and Zoom, and the telemedicine apps Medifi and Seriousmd. Reliability and ease of use influence app choice, particularly among patients

Tel. No.: (02)8928-7014 • (02) 8928-3768 • Fax No.: (02) 3436-1556 • Email: philgut50@yahoo.com

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However, the lack of digital knowhow can be a major barrier to the adoption of telemedicine, especially for older patients. Healthcare providers should inform patients that all digital platforms have potential data privacy risks. Moreover, despite its convenience teleconsultation does not provide hands-on physical examination.

Teleconsultation via video conference: Important reminders

- Prior to any teleconsultation, instruct the patient to read and sign the Teleconsultation Conforme (see Appendix). The patient should then electronically send the accomplished conforme to the physician before the teleconsultation.
- You must make it absolutely clear to patients that **audio- or video-recording of teleconsultations and uploading such recordings on social media are strictly prohibited.**
- A strong and stable Internet connection is important.
- Find a quiet, well-lit room to hold the teleconsultation.
- Set the camera of your device (smartphone or laptop) at eye level.
- Wear professional-looking clothes, preferably a white coat. Ensure a neat and presentable appearance.
- Instruct family members to assist patients who are not tech-savvy or have mobility issues (e.g. post-stroke) during the teleconsultation.
- Begin the teleconsultation by stating your full name, title or designation, specialization, and hospital where you practice.
- Document all pertinent details of the teleconsultation, i.e. personal data, history, diagnostics, plan of management, etc., and keep a copy (electronic or hard) for your files. To facilitate visual examination, you may ask patients to send pictures of the body part/s to be examined. Take all necessary steps to safeguard patient data privacy.
- Whenever possible, ask patients to forward any available laboratory or imaging results for your review prior to the teleconsultation. This will give you more time to draw up the patient's management plan beforehand and maximize the time allotted for teleconsultation.
- If additional laboratory tests are warranted, send the laboratory request form to the patient electronically. Instruct the patient to acknowledge receipt of the request form.



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- Electronic prescriptions are accepted in all local drugstores and pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Affix your e-signature and indicate your PRC license number and PTR number in the e-prescription.
- In cases where consultation fees are paid through online banking, patients may get the official receipt either (a) as hard copy from clinics when normal operations resume; or (b) as digital copy to be transmitted electronically.
- At the moment, pending issuances of clear policies from HMOs governing teleconsultation it is best for both patients and physicians to have mutual agreement regarding settlement of the consultation fees.

References:

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