

Virtual Pain Management Clinic during COVID-19 pandemic: Experience from Qatar

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COVID-19 pandemic has had global effects on different healthcare systems (1). Many services were reshaped to cope with current circumstances (2). To accommodate social distancing, most of the clinics were run virtually (3)(4). We would like to share the experience with virtual pain management clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic in Qatar.

Since March 2020, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Qatar, the outpatient clinics were run through telephonic conversations with the patients. Moreover, telephonic consultations were introduced to minimize the visits to the Primary Healthcare Centers (PHC). Also, free medication home delivery service was introduced to minimize patients' medication refill visits to health centers and hospitals, to decrease risks of getting and transmitting the virus.

In the pain management clinics, most interviewed patients are those following for traumatic spinal cord injuries and those with neuropathies who have chronic pain necessitating a continuous supply of a wide range of narcotics and analgesics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have noticed an increase in the number of consulted patients by around 50%, which is most probably due to the new convenient telephonic consultation system. Despite that, the service was maintained with high efficiency which was reflected in the observed patients' satisfaction. The Call center was not assigned only for refill of medication appointments, but also accepted acute consultations

and assisted patients to get face to face appointments if indicated.

The high population awareness about the pandemic was impressive as shown by the understanding of the importance of the virtual clinic to comply with social distancing. Many patients opted not to come to the clinics until the pandemic is over, and would prefer to come and collect their medications only. It is important to note that, unlike other services, narcotic medications need to be collected in person after showing identity cards. Recently, we started calling a small number of patients to attend the clinics when we feel that the nature of their pain has changed and they need examination and further evaluation.

There was cancellation of most elective chronic pain management procedures except for those whose pain was highly indicated like sciatica pain, as if it was left without management or delayed, it may result in increase in pain, depression and disability (5). Suspicion of conditions like spinal fracture or cauda equina syndrome needs emergency intervention. Procedures mainly are conducted in a hospital room designated for such purposes to guarantee more precautions, unlike before the COVID-19 era where procedures were done as out-patient or office-based procedures. All patients should do the PCR test 48 hours before the procedure and the test should be negative so the procedure can be performed. Training of pain fellows and anesthesia residents may be affected

because of less exposure to patients and interventional procedures. Anyhow, we have noticed some patients are persistently preferring pain interventions over medications despite the current restrictions on elective procedures.

According to our research, no randomized controlled trials RCTs were done regarding the effects of steroids used in pain management procedures and the increased risk to COVID-19 or virus transmission. Corticosteroids impact on clinical outcomes in patients with influenza is controversial. A systematic review and meta-analysis conducted on ten trials involving 6,548 patients showed corticosteroids were associated with higher mortality, longer stay in the intensive care unit and a higher rate of secondary infection (6). Anyhow, we decreased the steroid dose in pain management procedures to reduce any possible risk of harm to our patients, especially those who are immunocompromised and high-risk.

Overall, we find the experience in the pain management clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic is promising and will have an impact after the return to normal services once the pandemic is over.

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