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Research paper

Use of social media for online consultation during the COVID-19 pandemic: Attitudes of the medical professionals

Loma Al-Mansouri^{1,2,*}, Firas R. AL-Obaidi^{3,4}

ABSTRACT

Background: Healthcare providers are facing unprecedented challenges in the era of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The current situation compels the use of alternatives for communication between the patients and healthcare providers. The use of telemedicine has expanded globally during the COVID-19 pandemic. The range of online consultations varies from advising patients to providing diagnosis and follow-up.

Methods: We assessed the attitudes of health professionals toward the use of social media for online consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic using an online survey that was distributed to medical professionals in Iraq.

Results: The total number of participants was 124 Iraqi medical professionals in different specialties (72.4% men and 27.6% women). The majority of participants (71.6%) reported that they had previous experience with online consultation and patient communication using social media before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A large proportion of the participants (72.2%) indicated that online consultation was useful for patient health and safety.

Conclusions: Despite the limitations facing online consultation and lack of proper infrastructure for telemedicine in Iraq, many health professionals indicated a positive attitude and recommend extending the use of online consultation after the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, teleconsultation, online consultation

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INTRODUCTION

Healthcare providers are facing unprecedented challenges in the era of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic that has been declared by WHO as an international public health emergency¹.

The overwhelming wave of infected patients, the lockdown applied globally, social distancing, and fear of contracting the infection have led many patients to avoid presenting to hospitals and clinics². The current situation compels the use of alternatives for communication between the patients and healthcare providers. The use of telemedicine has expanded globally during the COVID-19 pandemic to implement measures required to control infections³. The adoption of online visits or consultations can have significant advantages by providing real-time information and professional advice by doctors to their patients during shortage of access to medical facilities^{4,5}.

In this study, we evaluate the attitudes of medical professionals in Iraq regarding the experience of using social media for online consultation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS

All the participants in this study volunteered to take part, and thus no ethical approval was obtained to perform the study. We assessed the attitudes of health professionals toward the use of social media for online consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A cross-sectional study was conducted using an online survey designed using a survey-generating website (Google Forms) and was distributed securely via e-mail and social media messages to Iraqi medical professionals. The survey was conducted from May 2020 through July 2020. The responses were received anonymously and were analyzed and reported using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistical analysis was carried out using Microsoft Excel 10 and SPSS software version 11.

RESULTS

This cross-sectional survey was conducted using an online survey covering 124 Iraqi medical professionals from different specialties (72.4% men and 27.6% women). The majority of participants (71.6%) reported that they had previous experience with online consultation and patient communication before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in Figure 1. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 44.8% of the participants answered that there was a significant increase in using social media for online consultation, and 24.1% reported a very significant increase in the use of social media for online consultation, as shown in Figure 2.

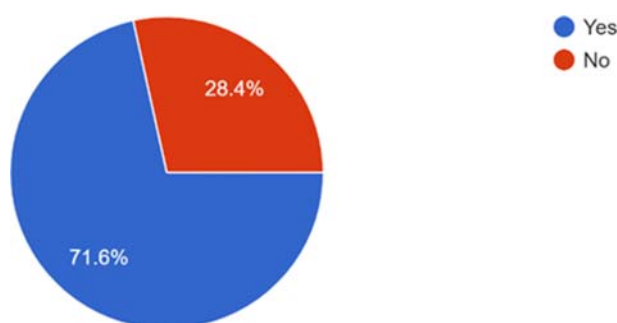


Figure 1. Previous experience with online consultation.

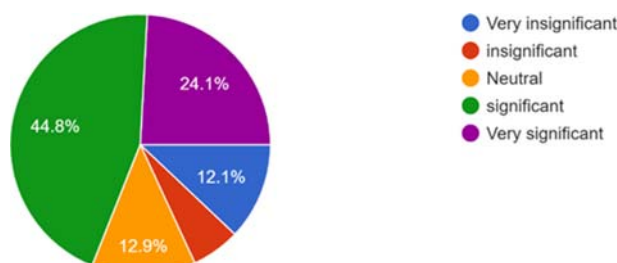


Figure 2. Rate of increase in using social media for online consultation after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The applications used for communication with the patients were social media applications on smartphones, where almost all participants (95.7%) used the WhatsApp application, as shown in Figure 3.

Regarding the attitude of the participants toward the usefulness of online consultation through social media during the pandemic, 72.2% of them indicated that it was useful for patient health and safety, as shown in Figure 4.

We questioned the participants regarding the type of service provided during the online consultation, and 90.5% of them felt that the online medical service mainly provided medical advice to the patients (reassuring, explaining, directing the patients to go to the hospital, or taking further action). Other types of services were prescribing medications (57.8%), providing diagnoses in selected cases based on history and previous investigations (26.7%), and follow-up (57.8%), as shown in Figure 5. In addition, the survey revealed that 60.5% of online consultations were for emergency cases, as shown in Figure 6. At the end of the survey, the future use of social media for online consultation was recommended by 63.6% of health professionals, as shown in Figure 7.

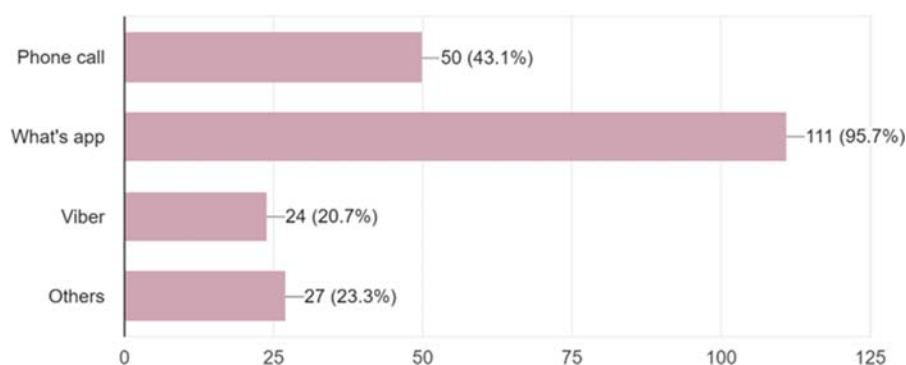


Figure 3. Type of social media applications used for online consultation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

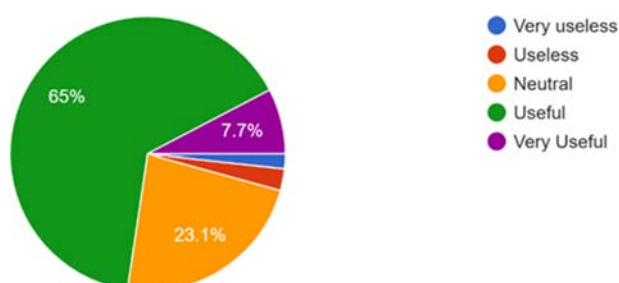


Figure 4. Usefulness of social media for online consultation.

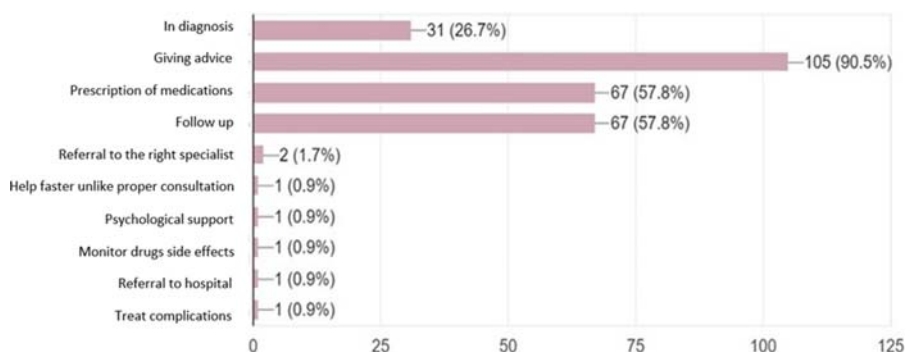


Figure 5. Online consultation outcomes helpful to the patients.

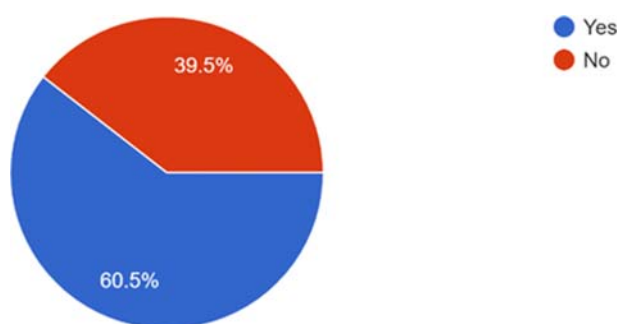


Figure 6. Emergency cases and online consultation.

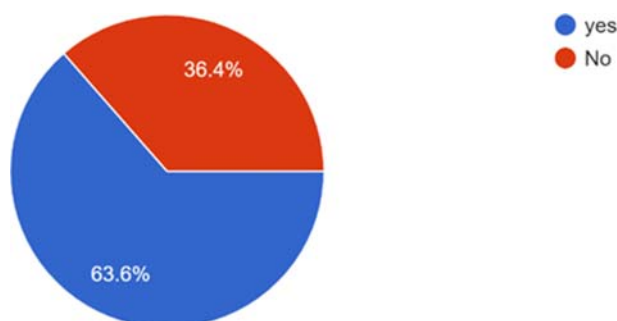


Figure 7. Recommendation of medical professionals for continuing use of online consultation through social media.

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has enforced changes to healthcare services globally. The standard face-to-face interview with the patients was not possible in many instances¹. Alternatives must be established to save patients' lives, providing professional advice and at the same time minimizing the risk of transmitting the infection to the patients and healthcare professionals.

Teleconsultation can ensure proper access to medical care without increasing the infection risk in an overcrowded hospital and especially help remote patients during the pandemic⁶. In many countries, telemedicine has made a significant contribution to the healthcare system⁷.

The advances in technology facilitate the emerging role of telemedicine. The role of telemedicine has progressively increased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to limitations of access to hospitals and outpatient clinics. However, in developing countries, there is no telemedicine infrastructure, and many healthcare professionals have personalized telemedicine by conducting online consultation through phone calls and social media applications to communicate with patients, which is proving to be helpful in disseminating correct information and guiding patients in the right direction⁸.

Our survey explores the attitude of health professionals in Iraq toward telemedicine and their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show increased use of social media for online consultation during the pandemic. The range of online consultation varies from advising patients to providing diagnosis and follow-up. Despite being a simpler form of telemedicine than that in developed countries, the majority of healthcare professionals reported the usefulness of online consultation with their patients. The positive attitude regarding communication with patients through social media is similar to that reported by other studies⁹.

Limitations of the study

This study was conducted online, and the sample size was small. The limited number of respondents may reflect the group most enthusiastic to use technology and social media for professional purposes, which could create a bias in the conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limitations of online consultation and lack of proper infrastructure for telemedicine in Iraq, many health professionals indicate a positive attitude and recommend extending the use of social media for online consultation after the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflict of interest

Both the authors, Loma Al-Mansouri and Firas AL-Obaidi, had none to declare.

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