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Telemedicine being considered a more reliable option

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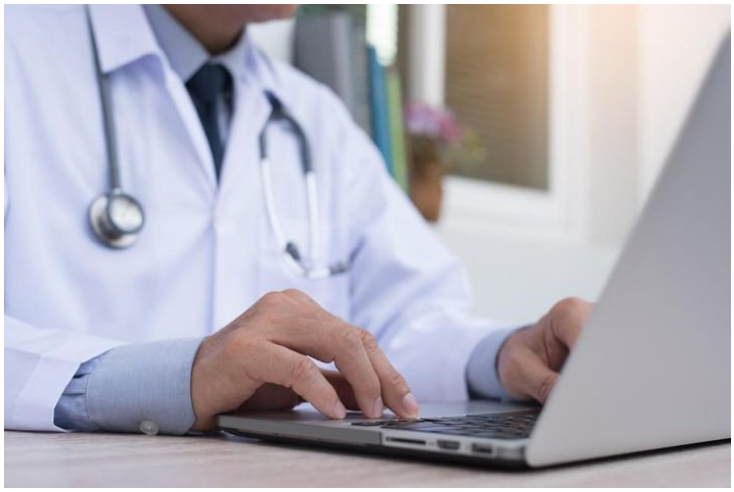

The coronavirus pandemic has caused significant disruptions in the healthcare sector and has evidently accelerated the use of telemedicine or virtual medical consultations. In a recent survey, a whopping 70 per cent agreed that telemedicine is going to be the future of healthcare in India. The country's leading telemedicine healthcare clinics have released some interesting insights about how far this form of medical consultation has been adopted.

The survey saw maximum participation by the millennials. About 53.2 per cent of these were females of all age-groups. News and media coverage of the recent spurt in E-clinics have bode well for virtual medical consultations as about 35 per cent became aware about telemedicine through this medium. A close second, at 31 per cent, were those who came to know about it from their family and friends. Due to lockdown, consumption of news and recent developments increased among people and this has contributed significantly to awareness about telemedicine.

The option to access healthcare facilities remotely for health management purposes by using digital information and communication technologies is driving the growth of telemedicine in a time when people are unable to make physical visits to the doctor.

Overall, the survey reveals a consensus among all that telemedicine is here to stay for long even after the pandemic is over. Majority participants admitted to using telemedicine at least 2-3 times in the past four to five months, with about 40 per cent saying that they used telemedicine the most during the period of lockdown. Post the lockdown, many government hospitals, private hospitals and e-pharmacies have taken to telemedicine. Many corporates also have adopted telemedicine in their employee wellness strategies.

The surge in tele-consultations follows the long-pending telemedicine guidelines which were finally issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), in partnership with NITI Aayog and Board of Governors (BoG), Medical Council of India (MCI).

About 60 per cent said they found it relatively easy to book an appointment online for a virtual consultation and given the current times where social distancing is the need of the hour, this is a more beneficial and safer alternative to visiting a doctor in person, which would otherwise expose them to the risk of contracting the virus. The only barrier that many faced in this mode of consultation is the availability of doctors, something that is quite understandable in view of the epic proportions of the ongoing health crisis.

According to Ayush Mishra, CEO, Tattvan E-clinics, "Telemedicine is definitely being used on the frontline amid the coronavirus outbreak. The pandemic has forced people to stay at home and cancelled all traditional medical appointments, imposing a new standard of living on every individual – not on just those who became infected. This resulted as an emerging opportunity to implement new technologies and strategies as the field embarked on a new frontier of healthcare. As per the survey, around 70 per cent agreed that tele-health consultations are going to be the new normal of healthcare sector in India. It is still complicated due to the barriers like education, innovations, language, etc, but the landscape of telemedicine could continue to change, to the betterment of physicians and patients alike".

A good number of participants agreed that telemedicine makes it a lot easier to avail healthcare during times of disasters and pandemics and are reasonably satisfied with the apparatus in place presently. They find it to be a more reliable and comfortable option as compared to face-to-face consultations, because telemedicine takes care of exigencies - providing timely, last-minute service to chronic patients, eliminating the waiting time for ambulances and the like.

Non-exposure to potentially sick patients and easy access to specialty experts/doctors pan-India emerged as the key benefits of telemedicine followed closely by saving transportation fee and time and more convenient clinic visits. Thus, the survey paints a positive picture for telemedicine in India with the majority conceding to the view that telemedicine will grow exponentially in the times to come and more medicines and other medical services should be made available digitally.

As per the conversation with Anmol Arora, CEO, DocVita, he said "In India, virtual consultations are currently picking up because of the safety they bring to both patients and providers from getting infected. For some specialties, telemedicine is preferred over in-person visits for the anonymity and privacy it offers, like therapy. At DocVita, consultation requests have been growing 2x every month, and 2 per cent of our users have been inviting others to join the platform. While we expect to keep up with the growth in the coming months, we anticipate the emergence of telemedicine as the new normal as people become acquainted with online healthcare services. There are also other reasons behind the rising popularity of telemedicine - reduced travel and a convenient, democratised access to healthcare for all. Besides, 70 per cent of health issues can be diagnosed and treated online, such as issues related to dermatology, nutrition and mental health. Majority of requests on the platform have been for family doctors and dermatologists."