

## REFLECTIONS ON TELEHEALTH SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

REFLEXIONES SOBRE LOS SERVICIOS DE TELESALUD DURANTE LA PANDEMIA COVID-19

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### Resumen

La pandemia Covid-19 trajo muchos desafíos a la población en general y especialmente a los personales de la salud, quienes recurrieron a formas alternativas de proporcionar asistencia cuando lo cuidado presencial a veces no era factible. El objetivo de este artículo es reflexionar sobre la importancia de los servicios de telesalud durante la pandemia Covid-19. Principalmente al inicio de la pandemia, los servicios de telesalud trajeron opciones para que los profesionales de la salud pudieran garantizar la continuidad de la asistencia a la población y la capacitación del personal de salud. A pesar de las barreras enfrentadas durante el uso de la tecnología de la información y la comunicación, la utilización de estos servicios afectó positivamente tanto a los profeseonales de la salud como a los pacientes. En el caso específico de la enfermería, los servicios de telesalud fueron aliados del enfermero en el ejercicio de sus funciones como cuidador, educador, investigador y gestor. Los formuladores de políticas de salud deben facilitar la implementación de la telesalud en los establecimientos de salud de todo el mundo, lo que mejorará la calidad de la asistencia de salud ahora y en el período pospandémico.

**Palabras Clave:** COVID-19, Telemedicina, Personal de Salud, Teleenfermería, Enfermeros

### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought many challenges to the population in general and especially to healthcare workers, who resorted to alternative ways to assist when in-person care was sometimes not feasible. This article aimed to reflect on the importance of telehealth services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Mainly at the beginning of the pandemic, telehealth services provided options so that health professionals could guarantee the continuity of care to the population and the training of health personnel. Despite the barriers faced during the use of technology of information and communication, the use of these services positively affected both healthcare workers and patients. In the specific case of nursing, telehealth services were allies of the nurse in the exercise of his/her duties as caregiver, educator, researcher, and manager. Health policymakers must facilitate the implementation of telehealth in healthcare facilities around the world, which will improve the quality of healthcare now and in the post-pandemic period.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Telemedicine, Health Personnel, Telenursing, Nurses.

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## 1. Introduction

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) emerged in late 2019 and soon became a pandemic. The then-unknown disease, caused panic, changing the routine of people around the world, and leaving the health system of many countries overwhelmed (1-2).

One of the main measures to contain the spread of the disease, whose most severe cases are seen in the elderly and people with comorbidities, is social distancing (3). However, the elderly and the chronically ill people must receive regular health care, and cannot stay away from the watchful eyes of their doctors and nurses for very long periods.

The disease brought uncertainties to the general population, who sought answers regarding symptoms, ways of transmission, and prevention. The social distancing and the need to stay away from health facilities, which were places where the risk of contamination was higher, made health professionals resort to alternative ways to treat and guide the population (4). Thus, telehealth services play key roles in caring during the Covid-19 pandemic (4-5).

Telehealth is the distance care provided by healthcare workers using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Through telehealth, necessary information for the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of

diseases is exchanged; in addition, continuing education of health personnel is carried out, thus promoting the health of the population (6).

Aiming to reduce the exposure to the virus most cities have been quarantined, which means that some people were kept far from caregivers and health advisors that represented irreparable risks to the health of these individuals and their communities. Healthcare workers must closely monitor their patients, paying attention to any changes in their health. With the advent of the pandemic, nursing care was also challenged by the need to adapt to a new reality, in which patients, due to social distancing, could no longer attend healthcare institutions with such frequency due to the risks of contamination by Covid-19 (1,7). Nurses, who are key points for health education and care delivery, also changed their work routines and started to use telehealth services more frequently to care for individuals and their communities (1,7). This article aimed to reflect on the importance of telehealth services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 2. Telehealth Services

The telehealth service which is defined as the provision of non-presential assistance aims to care, overcoming geographic barriers; using telephone, emails, social media, and video

conferences, among other types of technologies to allow the assistance of individuals even when they are physically far from healthcare institutions (4,6).

The history of telehealth services begins around the 19th century, but it is with the emergence of the Internet that these services gain greater prominence, as it is online that ICTs diversify and become more popular (8).

The telehealth service is practiced between health professionals and the population in health promotion, and also among healthcare workers in improving their knowledge and skills (4,6,8). Telehealth service allows the monitoring of chronically ill people, the decrease in the sense of isolation of bedridden patients, and the guidance of the individuals about diseases and protective measures, encouraging them to be active agents in the promotion of their own health. Also, this service allows the realization of diagnosis and treatment of those who do not have access to health facilities due to geographical barriers, reducing the waiting time for care. In addition, telehealth promotes communication between healthcare workers from different countries allowing the exchange of information between them and improving the quality of care (6).

Among the obstacles to the use of such technological services are the lack of infrastructure, lack of trained personnel, lack of information, lack of resources, and lack of

political commitment. However, healthcare workers must overcome these barriers in favor of providing more comprehensive and qualified care to the population (6).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the telehealth service often proved to be the only alternative to maintain the contact between healthcare workers and patients who could not attend healthcare facilities due to the risk of contamination by SARS-CoV-2 and dissemination of the disease (5). With the advent of the pandemic; laws, health policies, and political strategies were revised, making telehealth services improve and become increasingly viable (5). Remote health services had positive effects for both patients and healthcare workers, (9) when the population was surrounded by uncertainty and fears brought on by an unknown and highly contagious disease.

### **3. Nursing and Telehealth**

Telehealth service in nursing or telenursing is performed by professionals from the nursing team who provide assistance in a non-presential manner using ICTs (1). This service takes place at a distance, using telephone conversations or video conferences, videos, and photographs (1). However, the most used way is still the telephone call (1).

Nurses became more familiar with telehealth services due to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic (9). During the pandemic, the

nursing team monitored remotely from newborns to the elderly using telehealth services. Patients informed their nurses about their vital signs, which they measured by themselves; using this information, nurses performed the nursing consultation, providing diagnoses and care plans, thus ensuring the continuity of nursing care. Telenursing was used a lot especially in the initial stage of the pandemic when the whole context was very uncertain and the fear of contagion was very high (7). The healthy population was oriented both about Covid-19 and about other diseases, allowing nursing also to take care of the mental health of the population, which was threatened by the pandemic and all its consequences (9). In addition, nurse managers could plan and evaluate their actions through systematic responses generated by the best databases.

Distance education service, in addition to being used by nurses to treat and guide the population, also was used to train the nursing staff regarding Covid-19 and protective measures (4,10). It also enables the evaluation of the care provided by the health team at a time when treatment protocols were being revised all the time (4,10).

Nurses are care providers, educators, managers, and researchers. Telehealth services allowed these professionals to continue developing their functions in all

these areas. ICTs allowed for nursing diagnoses and care to be made, for health education and training for the nursing staff, in addition to infection control to be carried out, for research in the field of nursing to be developed, and they were also allies of the nursing managers in the administration of services at such a difficult and uncertain time as was the beginning of the pandemic period.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The pandemic represents a global challenge, especially for the health system. Health professionals, including nurses, were challenged by a disease that soon became a pandemic. Occasions like these, require that healthcare workers use, in addition to knowledge and skills, creativity to overcome obstacles. Technological advances have always been reflected in the health field, and in the context of the pandemic, technology has once again shown itself to be a great ally of health professionals. Telehealth services, which were used in different ways, made it possible to provide continuous assistance to the population, even without the in-person factor, which especially in the early stages of the pandemic represented a great risk.

Health professionals must overcome the barriers that permeate the provision of care through telehealth services, as the benefits

brought by ICTs are numerous and positively affect both patients and caregivers. Health policymakers should facilitate the implementation of telehealth in health care institutions around the world, which will improve the quality of health care, not only during the pandemic but also in the post-pandemic period. Further studies should be carried out to assess the perception of patients and health professionals, especially nurses, regarding the telehealth services used during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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