Single-centre telephone survey on patients’ perspectives regarding remote paediatric outpatient consultations in a district general hospital

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote consultations became a new norm for paediatric outpatient clinics. The objective of this survey was to find patients’ perspective on telephone consultations. 200 patients, who had remote consultations since April 2020, were surveyed and their responses were analysed. Almost half (98/200) of the patients or their parents preferred remote consultations mixed with face-to-face consultations; only a fifth (40/200) preferred exclusively face-to-face consultations; and approximately a third (62/200) preferred exclusively remote consultations. In conclusion, remote consultations are becoming a popular choice for patients, although there are limitations, especially in the context of safeguarding.

Results of the survey (figure 1) showed that only a fifth of patients/parents (40/200) preferred exclusively face-to-face consultations. Approximately a third (62/200) preferred virtual consultations either by telephone or through video. Almost half (98/200) preferred a mixture of virtual (telephone/video) and face-to-face consultations with majority preferring face-to-face consultation initially and then virtual consultation follow-up.

In patients’/parents’ own words, the main reasons for preference for exclusively face-to-face consultations were regarding the need for examination of the child and ease of communication (box 1, section A). There were a variety of reasons for preference for virtual consultation, but the main themes were decreased risk of infection, convenience and time saving (box 1, section B). Parents also felt that this was a safe option as face-to-face review could be organised at a later date if needed.

In summary, although there can be limitations to virtual consultations, for example, lack of ability to examine the child physically and record their growth parameters, there are several advantages of virtual consultations as our survey results show. Remote consultations are particularly suitable for chronic conditions and may be appropriate for some new referrals, provided the patients are triaged appropriately. Virtual clinics can also support providers to meet increased demand. Recent data from the paediatric outpatient department showed that we were able to reduce the waiting periods significantly. Before

Figure 1 Patient’s/Parent’s preferences for clinic consultation.
the start of the pandemic, the waiting list for the follow-up patients in some of the clinics was delayed by up to 1.5 years, but as a result of virtual clinics, we were able to clear the backlog completely and to see children within the recommended time scale.

However, technology comes with its own challenges, especially in a paediatric setting; one needs to be careful whether virtual consultation will be appropriate in the context of safeguarding and effective in communicating well with children or young people.²

On balance, virtual consultations seem to be appropriate for and preferred by most children and parents, as long factors such as safeguarding and need for investigations or examination are taken into account carefully. The widespread introduction of virtual clinics has been a positive outcome from the pandemic, and this study suggests that virtual clinics are already a popular choice among parents.

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