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Evaluation of the use of telehealth in Dietetics' practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Telehealth, which involves the remote delivery of healthcare services through virtual technologies, has been shown to have benefits such as reducing hospitalisations and length of stay for patients^(1,2). The global COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated the adoption of telehealth among clinical nutritionists. For instance, in the USA, telehealth usage for nutritional care has increased from 37% to 78% among clinical nutritionists⁽³⁾, while in Italy, the adoption of telenutrition services by Registered Dietitians (RDNs) has risen from 16% to 63%⁽⁴⁾. These statistics highlight the rapid integration of telehealth into dietetics practices as a response to the global health crisis, reflecting a growing trend towards virtual care delivery as an effective method for providing nutritional care. While telehealth has made progress in Saudi Arabia⁽⁵⁾, there is a research gap regarding its prevalence and effectiveness in dietetics practice. This study aims to evaluate the current implementation of telehealth in dietetics practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia.

In this cross-sectional, a web-based online survey was used from mid-December 2022 to mid-May 2023. The study was distributed in several Saudi Arabian regions including (central, western, eastern, south, and north) and was completed by 306 clinical Registered Dietitians (RDNs) in public and private healthcare facilities who met the study's inclusion criteria. The survey consisted of 28 questions divided into four sections, covering sociodemographic information, past or current experiences, obstacles and challenges of telehealth usage, and the future prospects of telehealth. In this study, participants were requested to reflect on their current observations and previous experiences pertaining to the utilisation of telehealth in the field of dietetics. To ensure the validity and relevance of the survey, it was reviewed by a panel of experienced dietitians in Saudi Arabia to obtain their feedback before being used to collect data.

Our research findings reveal that 76% of RDNs in Saudi Arabia utilize telehealth in their practice. The most common obstacles reported by RDNs using telehealth include internet connectivity issues (21.9%), patient disengagement and lack of enthusiasm (21.3%), and difficulties in coordinating with patients (21%). Telehealth interventions used by RDNs primarily involve diet recall (33.7%), weight-related measurements (30.6%), lab findings (26%), and only 8% reported using telehealth for vital signs. A majority of participants (69.4%) believed that telehealth could improve patient accessibility and help reduce no-show rates (68.9%). Additionally, over 70% of participants agreed that telehealth offers them flexibility in inpatient consultations.

In conclusion, telehealth is widely utilised among RDNs in Saudi Arabia, with potential benefits such as decreased no-show rates. Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of telehealth usage among RDNs in Saudi Arabia.

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