

SHORT COMMUNICATION

CHAT MEDICINE: UNTOWARD RISE OF ONLINE INFORMAL TREATMENT

MOHAMMAD TANVIR ISLAM¹

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The world with technology is a world of connectivity. The physical visit to a health professional has been declined recently due to emerging popularity of telemedicine and other virtual health services particularly in this COVID-19 pandemic.¹ They may be pragmatic and effective, but a more non-professional engagement of the stakeholders are becoming prevalent where patients directly contact the physicians in an informal way, to take treatment or health advices using different chat apps like, Messenger, WhatsApp etc. About 3500 Bangladeshi physicians in a social media group participated in an online poll that revealed more than 95% of them have given online treatment or suggestions in an informal way and the practice is ongoing for most of them. As most of the requests come from their friends and relatives, they felt a social obligation towards the calls.

Off-the-cuff medicine is not a newer practice; with the advent of technology, its use has become more straightforward using chat platforms, audio and video calling.² Patients commonly request for treatment in chat box based on inadequate clinical information, often based on lab reports only. The attending physicians have limited chance to interact with the patient and take the history in details. Treating a patient based on lab reports only cannot be an efficient way either. So, an informal chit chat lacks the most essential part of the management. The medico-legal aspect of this practice has also been debated.³ These informal consultations lack necessary clinical record keeping and proper follow up in most of the cases.

Many a times these online requests come in inopportune moment when the physician may not be prepared to concentrate on the issue with full sincerity. Physicians readily feel uncomfortable and dissatisfied with these consultations.⁴ Also, liabilities towards a patient through this informal way may remain insufficient. Professional engagement without payment is another concern that puts this business into jeopardy. Moreover, prescribing drugs like antibiotics through texting in countries where drug legislation is not strictly maintained can have detrimental effects.

Online platforms can be a good way of communication between physicians and public to share views and health knowledge.⁵ Physicians can interchange their expertise and knowledge with their colleagues through this pathway easily and different social media groups of doctors are already active for many years. But an online interaction between physicians and that with public will not bear the same strength to solve dilemmas of such an intricate subject. While people can get information in this cheaper and faster way, the territory is actually vast and the boundary is uncertain. Treatment from a physician demands proper concentration, time, liability and follow up with proper documentation. If not done properly, then the practice can be discouraged and the physicians can politely refuse to take part in such harmful activities. It's time that we take necessary steps to formulate guidelines to reshape this emerging new concept that can be coined as "Chat Medicine". Health services should be cheap and affordable but at the same time "accurate" and "effective" for the greater benefit.

1. Mohammad Tanvir Islam, Associate Professor, Department of Medicine, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Shahbag, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Address of Correspondence: Dr.Mohammad Tanvir Islam, Associate Professor, Department of Medicine, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Shahbag, Dhaka, Bangladesh. E-mail:

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