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Covid-19: Surgeons embrace virtual consultations to meet patients' needs during pandemic

Abi Rimmer

The Royal College of Surgeons of England has published guidance on conducting virtual consultations after a survey found that 90% of surgeons had used them during the covid-19 pandemic.

A survey of 1741 surgeons and surgical trainees conducted by the college from 8 to 15 June found that 91% of surgeons had used telephone or video conferencing for patient consultations and outpatient clinics during the pandemic. Most (83%) also said that they had conducted team meetings remotely, such as multidisciplinary team meetings.

While virtual consultations are relatively common in the NHS, the college said that they would play a particularly significant role in the NHS after covid-19 and in future pandemic planning. The college vice president, Cliff Shearman, explained that using virtual consultations during the pandemic had reduced the need for patients to travel to hospital.

“They allow surgeons to speak with patients who are unable to travel,” he said, “or to make contact with patients at a difficult time when many might be concerned that their face-to-face appointment has been cancelled.”

He added that virtual consultations could encourage patients to seek medical help despite wanting to avoid hospital because of concerns about possible infection.

“They can also enable surgeons to carry out clinical work remotely and support hospitals to meet increased demand—for example, if there is a local outbreak and staff are off sick,” he said.

New guidance

Speaking at a Royal Society of Medicine online event on 30 June, Nik Patel, director of cardiovascular medicine at East Sussex Healthcare, said that secondary care doctors were likely to use more virtual consultations after the pandemic. He said that it would allow them to do more work with patients in the community.

“We’ve learned that we are able to consult using technology, technology that we talked about before but never actually used,” said Patel. “I have colleagues who were reticent about using technology before, who now wouldn’t go back.”

The Royal College of Surgeons of England has produced two pieces of guidance to help surgeons make the most of virtual consultations. The first sets out the principles of the consent process and provides advice on what additional information should be included in conversations with patients while covid-19 is still prevalent.¹ The second is a best practice guide for surgeons on how to conduct virtual consultations with their patients, either by phone or video.²

1 Royal College of Surgeons of England. Consent to treatment while covid-19 is present in society. 30 Jun 2020. <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/coronavirus/recovery-of-surgical-services/tool-5/>.

2 Royal College of Surgeons of England. Virtual consultations. 30 Jun 2020. <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/coronavirus/recovery-of-surgical-services/tool-4/>.

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