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Technology and medical care in India: Growth of telehealth awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Objectives: COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of telemedicine in health care delivery worldwide. However, the true success of telemedicine depends on patients' acceptance, which in turn is decided by their interest in telemedicine. In this study, we aim to assess the population interest in telemedicine services across India during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: We measured national-level public interest in 'telemedicine' using terms related to telemedicine in Google Trends during the years 2019 and 2020. The relationship between population search volume for telemedicine (composite score) and the numbers of COVID-19 cases during the early phase of COVID-19 were analyzed. The literacy rate and relative interest in telemedicine in the states were analyzed to assess the impact of education on telemedicine interest.

Results: The interest in telemedicine in the year 2020 is higher compared to the year 2019 ($U=269.5$, $z=-7.043$, $p<0.001$). The search trends for telemedicine increased consistently during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The greatest search volume was seen in Andhra Pradesh. There was a strong correlation ($r=0.65$, $P<.001$) between the initial increase in the number of COVID-19 cases and population-level interest in telemedicine over time. We observed that the relative interest in telemedicine in the states for the year 2019 showed a significant direct relationship with the literacy rate ($r=0.47$, $p=0.04$). However, the relative interest in telemedicine in the states for the year 2020 showed no relationship with the state literacy rate. This is due to the increased need for teleconsultation in 2020 and spread of telemedicine in the country.

Conclusions: Population interest in telemedicine was higher in the year 2020 compared to the previous year and remained high even after easing of lockdown. COVID-19 pandemic has played an important role in increasing the Indian public's interest in telemedicine.