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Treating RMD patients in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic - between overburdening and lockdown

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PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON PATIENTS WITH RHEUMATOLOGICAL DISORDERS - A WEB BASED CROSS-SECTIONAL MULTICENTRE SURVEY

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Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in uncertainty and negative psychological outcomes for patients with autoimmune rheumatic diseases for several reasons.¹ The anxiety is due to "underlying conditions" that are expected to increase the risk of infection and / or severe complications. Patients with rheumatological disorders fall into this group as they are believed to be immunosuppressed due to disease or the treatment. It is essential to understand the

level of anxiety among the rheumatic disease patients at the current situation of COVID-19.

Objectives: To study difference in Anxiety score (Mean/Avg Score) among following groups-underlying rheumatic disease, age, gender, marital status, educational status, employment status, medications, those who were on steroids/not, those who are Biologicals / Not.

Methods: A web-based cross-sectional multi-centre survey was done across 5 rheumatology centres in India. The study duration was between 9th May and 16th May 2020. The questionnaire included consent, demographic details, medication history, opinion about tele rheumatology services and anxiety score measured by Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)².

Results: The survey was sent to 2987 patients, there were 933 responses and 581 were complete (Male =175). Complete responses were considered for data analysis. Most respondents were less than 50 years of age (70.6%). Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) was the most frequent (50.6%) diagnosis followed by other conditions. Most of the patients (43%) were on combination DMARD therapy, 12.7% of patients were on biological drugs and 23.9% of patients were on glucocorticoids. Statistically significant higher anxiety scores were observed in females, patients suffering from fibromyalgia, patients on glucocorticoids and biological agents. There was no difference in the anxiety scores with regard to age, educational status, and employment status. Difficulty in meeting rheumatologists and getting medications was expressed by 327 (56.2%) and 73 (29.7%) respondents respectively. Majority of respondents (86.6 %) agreed/strongly agreed regarding use of telemedicine to access health care during the crisis.

Conclusion: The findings of the study revealed that anxiety is a major concern in patients with autoimmune rheumatic diseases. Fibromyalgia patients and those who were on glucocorticoids and biological drugs were found to have more anxiety levels compared to other groups of patients. In such periods of public health crises, telemedicine is a great tool for patients to access health-care without fear of going to hospital. There is a need to intensify the awareness and address the mental health issues of rheumatology patients during this COVID-19 pandemic.

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