Online management of rheumatoid arthritis during COVID-19 pandemic

We have read with great interest the recent article from Figueroa-Parra et al1 entitled ‘Are my patients with rheumatic diseases at higher risk of COVID-19?’ We agree that patients with rheumatic diseases are at higher risk of communicable diseases such as COVID-19, and protective measures are required.

Patients with rheumatic diseases need frequent doctor appointments to get tailored and individualised therapies.2 However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, most outpatient services were cancelled to avoid cross-infection. Besides, visiting hospitals puts these patients at higher risk of being infected, in consideration of their advanced age and comorbidities.3 Thus one of the critical elements is the management of these chronic diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA), in a non-face-to-face method.

We had performed online healthcare services on different platforms, including but not limited to web-based hospital, WeChat, HaoDaiFu Online and TikTok. From 25 January to 31 March, 76 patients with RA were involved in online management, aiming for medications (47.4%), health condition evaluation (39.5%) and psychological guidance (13.1%). A series of popular medical articles had been uploaded which could help in improving patients’ understanding of their health conditions. Patients were provided with questionnaires for disease severity and function status, and prescription medications could be delivered by express service according to patients’ demand. They were pleased with their experience of our online management, where we got an average score of 4.6 out of 5 in patient satisfaction assessment. Interestingly, it was found that during the epidemic outbreak, there was a good opportunity to perform popular medical science, probably because more attention was paid to personal health conditions.

Based on our experience, patients are able to get access to medical services and medications without hospital appointments via online tools. For social healthcare system, online medical services deploy a large number of doctors in a short time, avoid overwhelmed outpatient service and reduce cross-infection by avoiding face-to-face interviews.4 These telehealth services would be effective tools for both doctors and patients, especially during public health emergencies.

Yang Zhang, Jian Wang, Liang Zhao, Jun Xiao, Zhanjun Shi

Division of Orthopaedic Surgery, Department of Orthopaedics, Nanfang Hospital, Southern Medical University, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence to Dr Zhanjun Shi, Department of Orthopaedics, Southern Medical University Nanfang Hospital, Guangzhou 510515, China; nfgk@sohu.com

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ORCID iD
Zhanjun Shi http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4772-4367

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