Editorial

Telepsychiatry

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Abstract

Telepsychiatry is an innovative practice in healthcare that applies telemedicine in the field of psychiatry and its importance and popularity is increasing day by day in Bangladesh. With the progress of telepsychiatry, issues like privacy, confidentiality, ethical and legal implications, emergency care provision should be addressed and attention should be given to make it a comprehensive way of delivering mental health care services.

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Telepsychiatry is an innovative practice in healthcare that applies telemedicine in the field of psychiatry.[1] Telepsychiatry is also called telemental health or e-mental health. Simply speaking, it is the use of ICT to provide psychiatric service across long distance. Using the information about communication technologies, mental health professionals can render their expert service to the far reach area.

Bangladesh is a densely populated country and has been struggling with a large number of people with mental disorder. In the latest national mental health survey, about 16.8% people of the country has been found to be suffering from mental disorders[2] but the number of mental healthcare providers are very low. Moreover, the treatment gap is about 94% in mental health services.[2] Here lies the greatest promise of telepsychiatry, which allows a doctor to work with his client in assessing the case, making a diagnosis and prescribing medicine for management. Individual and group psychotherapy can also be provided by these means. Telemental health has also been used for the purpose of education, training, storage, accessibility to medical data and research. Common modes of communication in telepsychiatry are the use of telephone, cell phone, text messaging, email, instant messaging, online chat forum for professional advice via website, blogs, etc. Video conferencing is the most important modality of telepsychiatry as it provides live, two-way interactive, full color, simultaneous video, audio and data communication.

Telepsychiatry is in the infancy stage in Bangladesh and it exists more as an offshoot of telemedicine rather than an independent service but, its importance and popularity are visible now-a-days. During this Covid-19 pandemic, the telepsychiatry service has gained momentum and importance among general people. By mid-2020, telemedicine service in Bangladesh has become a reliable way of communication between client and doctor, not only in psychiatry but also in all branches of medical profession. Psychiatrists, psychologists and even counselors provided extensive telemental health services to their clients even at free of cost during the COVID pandemic.

Psychiatry is a discipline which relies on human interaction and observation of human behavior. This sets psychiatry to be different from other disciplines of medical science. There has been concern that telepsychiatry may hinder many of the conventional doctor-patient relationship. So, the main challenges of telepsychiatry are client satisfaction and outcome, mental health service providers' satisfaction, availability of quality internet service and cost effectiveness of the service. A systemic review concluded that telepsychiatry had no significant difference in patient satisfaction with video conferencing as a modality of delivering of mental health service in comparison to face to face healthcare service.[3] However, satisfaction from the professionals' side is low with video conferencing.[4]

Despite controversies and challenges, telepsychiatry has huge scope and probability in this country. An individual from a remote village area can minimize his transport costs, the turmoil of bearing the expenses in the city, searching for a psychiatrist, wasting energy and time. Social stigma can be overthrown to some extent using the telepsychiatry. If the telepsychiatry service can be provided at the primary healthcare level, the mental health services will be able to reachdistant and remote areas and treatment gap can be minimized. With the progress of telepsychiatry, issues like privacy, confidentiality, ethical and legal implications, emergency psychiatric service should be addressed. Attention should also be given to other issues to make telepsychiatry a comprehensive way of delivering mental health care services.

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