



Relief Helpline by Voluntary Doctors in the Times of COVID19

Ankur Rakesh^{1*} and Shubhank Singh²¹Delhi Medical Council, India²Medanta – The Medicity, India***Corresponding Author:** Ankur Rakesh, Delhi Medical Council, India.**Received:** July 15, 2020**Published:** August 18, 2020© All rights are reserved by **Ankur Rakesh and Shubhank Singh.****Keywords:** COVID19; Helpline; Voluntary; Collateral; Pandemic

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and as mitigation measures, countries adopted different strategies to control the spread, including social distancing and strict lockdown measures [1]. The republic of India went into a strict nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020. This was expected to decelerate the spread of the virus in the country but had expected collateral damage which included limited access for people with common ailments and psychological stress [2]. In any disaster, the first responders are always a member of the local community and COVID19 was no different. Here we share the experience of how a group of doctors came together to provide voluntary service to the public through phone and online consults to contribute to alleviating the suffering of the population amidst the pandemic.

The next day on which the lockdown was announced, a team of doctor from different medical specialities and hailing from different states came together to start a helpline where patients needing medical advice can consult the doctors over a phone call, email, 'WhatsApp' or video calls. The doctors stayed connected on a 'WhatsApp' group and the plan was to share calls from individuals who are not able to access regular OPD services for primary health care including anxiety, common aches and pain including apprehension related to the COVID19 pandemic.

The doctors shared their phone numbers including access to messaging and video calling services and this was circulated through various communication media including reputed newspapers both in English and local language. The doctors shared the workload and referred the calls to each other based upon their field

of specialization. In addition, patients were linked to their nearest medical facility and the appropriate department for further health care as required. The group continued to support each other for patient consultation and critically evaluated their work including the relevance of the group based upon the call for support they were receiving. No identifying data of the callers was shared between the doctors and full confidentiality was maintained during the process.

A total of about 100 calls were received within 2 weeks from 23 March 2020 to 5 April 2020 making it an average of 10 calls per day which increased manifold in the coming weeks. In the beginning, there were two doctors in the group which grew to a 40 doctors group by the fourth week of June 2020. The medical field of specialization ranged from a general practitioner to a neurologist. There were challenges in providing a holistic service to all the callers because the profession of medicine is nourished by the human-touch which was not possible in this case. However, every effort was made to alleviate the suffering of the callers whether medical or psychological. Later clinical psychologists also joined the group as this was seen as essential support by the group based upon the patient calls.

The major calls that the doctors received were related to anxiety related to the pandemic and ranging to patients who were suspected COVID19 in isolation. Besides, various neurological and cardiology complaints were identified and patients were linked promptly to the nearest health facility. For example, one patient was promptly identified to be having symptoms of a cardiovascular event and was supported to reach the nearest hospital and received a Coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) through the group member's

support. Besides, the group also received calls from international patients who were stuck during the lockdown. Moreover, as the Indian Council of Medical Research received a nod from the Central Drug Control authority of the country for trials related to convalescent plasma therapy, the group actively circulated the requirements to facilitate linkage. The reasons for the doctors engaging in this activity was 'desire to support control of the pandemic' and a 'desire to give back' [3].

We believe this is one of the many groups of doctors who represent volunteers with a sense of good Samaritans who stepped up to support fellow citizens over and above their regular work. In the current scenarios where violence against doctors is another epidemic that the health facilities are dealing with, such acts of selfless service need to be encouraged to rekindle the respect for this noble profession [4]. Besides, any natural disaster the local community brings about the first and very crucial support and this is also evident in the group who came together to form this group. This highlights what a group of motivated health professionals and with innovative use of existing resources of Information and communication technology (ICT) could do to support similar situations [5]. The motivation for the doctors was fueled by a desire to contribute to the fight against the pandemic in some way, whilst more formal mechanisms were set-up. Within few weeks of the lock-down formal hotlines were functional and information about them was available widely within the nation but the work of the group stayed important as some patients called back to share their progress which was both satisfying and organically built a feedback loop for the group. This group exemplifies how a volunteer group could come in and organize an activity with the limited resources to achieve the greater good selflessly.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors are part of the 'Voluntary COVID19 relief group' and have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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