

Title: Patients perspective on transition to Telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic at a Palliative Care Oncology Clinic

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Background: Early palliative care, delivered in oncology palliative care clinics (OPCCs) typically involves in-person visits. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated rapid changes in the delivery of ambulatory care, and the adoption of virtual care where feasible.

Aims: To determine the experiences of patients who switched from in-person to virtual visits to an OPCC at a tertiary cancer centre in Toronto, Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: One-on-one telephone interviews were conducted with patients who had at least one in-person visit to the OPCC prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and whose subsequent follow-up was switched to virtual visits. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation based on sex, age, distance from their home to the cancer centre, and mode of virtual visits (telephone versus video). Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed; thematic analysis was used.

Results: Sixteen patients were interviewed, lasting between 20-60 minutes. Patients reported overall ease with the transition to virtual care, and appreciated that virtual care allowed for continuity of care without disruption during the pandemic. Previous in-person visits to the OPCC were felt to be advantageous in terms of rapport-building with the team, especially for the initial visit; non-verbal communication was highlighted. Many participants expressed a desire to have the option for virtual care beyond the pandemic, especially during periods of relative health stability.

Conclusions: Virtual visits to the OPCC during the COVID-19 pandemic were feasible and appreciated by patients. The role of virtual care for select clinical scenarios beyond the pandemic should be further explored.