

Sending photos through WhatsApp: A faster method for teleconsultation

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ABSTRACT

Advances in telecommunication are continuously improving modalities of telemedicine. We present the use of WhatsApp Messenger as an alternative method in telemedicine. Based on a surgical consultation case in Saudi Arabia, the use of the instant messaging service allowed for a fast consultation and saved the patient travel time and expenses. Thus, we recommend the use of WhatsApp as a more efficient method in teleconsultation, especially in cases when the patient is still present with the physician.

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Sending digital data, especially radiological images, via mobile phones is a well-established method in telemedicine.¹⁻³ While many Internet-based applications such as email may be adequate means of communication in telemedicine, they may not necessarily have the efficacy for instantaneous and immediate sharing between physicians, especially while the patient may still be in the physician's presence and waiting for diagnosis or decision of treatment to be made.

With the improvements in telecommunication technology in recent years including popularity of smartphones, exchanging data among clinicians has become easier and faster. The WhatsApp Messenger mobile application (WhatsApp) is a cross-platform instant messaging software that can be downloaded and used with smartphones with Internet access. In addition to sending instant text messages, the application allows the exchange of a variety of media files, including images, video files, and voice messages. We describe here our experiences using WhatsApp as an alternative method in telemedicine, in which it was used to immediately solve a medical problem while the patient was still in the presence of a physician.

A dermatologist from a remote hospital in another town contacted us from his clinic asked whether he can send a patient with a big scar in his forehead to our clinic for scar revision. As the patient resided in a town far away from our hospital, we requested the dermatologist to send an image exhibiting the scar through the WhatsApp. We received the image instantaneously (Fig. 1) and replied immediately to schedule the patient for scar revision. By using this service, we were able to eliminate the patient's need for a consultation visit and thus reducing the patient's journeys to only a single journey for surgery. This in turn saved him travel expenses and treatment time.



Figure 1. Received photo of a patient with scar forehead via WhatsApp.

When it comes to the inclusion of images in exchanged data, we find that the WhatsApp has better efficacy than other modalities in telemedicine. We believe that this method has the advantages over other known methods³ as it is faster⁴ and permits immediate response to the consultation while the patient is still present at the other end. The application's convenience is illustrated by the fact that data is sent and received instantaneously without requirement for further processing or conversion; moreover, no intermediate hardware such as a computer or viewer screen⁵ is required to visualize exchanged images. We recommend the use of WhatsApp as a faster, easier and more convenient method for exchanging photos between clinicians for teleconsultation.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

The author has declared there is no commercial conflict of interest.

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