

A qualitative exploration of virtual counselling by pharmacists via mobile devices during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Virtual counselling via mobile devices was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic as a novel alternative for pharmacists to conduct medication and device counselling. This study aims to explore pharmacists' perceptions of and experiences with this new counselling method. **Methods:** A generic qualitative approach was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pharmacists purposively sampled from Sarawak General Hospital between February and April 2022, until data saturation was achieved. An interview guide informed by relevant literature was used. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The resultant transcripts were then coded and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Results:** Fifteen participants were interviewed, revealing five themes that addressed anticipated and novel issues associated with virtual counselling. They acknowledged the necessity of virtual counselling given the circumstances but expressed that it could not fully replace physical counselling nor suitable for all patients. Demonstrating device usage and assessing patients' understanding proved challenging in virtual settings. The service also posed technical difficulties, requiring additional skills, equipment, facilities, and operating procedure changes. Virtual counselling shifted the patient-provider power dynamic, with patients now in a position to choose whether and when to be counselled. Participants emphasised the importance of post-counselling follow-ups to ensure the effectiveness of counselling and the need for a reliable communication channel for patient support or clarifications. **Conclusion:** Despite the challenges faced, participants adapted quickly to provide virtual counselling via mobile devices. As it is now a recognised option for counselling provision, the identified issues should be actively addressed to improve its effectiveness.