

Current and future impact of COVID 19 on Neurorehabilitation services in south Asia

Dr. Nirmal Surya, RVP, (south Asia), WFNR

The COVID-19 Pandemic has crippled the health systems of many developing countries in Asia. Poor infrastructure, poverty, lack of investments in healthcare sectors & poor policies has resulted in the collapse of health services at time of pandemic. Neurorehabilitation in developing countries including Asia is underdeveloped and inadequate and nearly 40% of the countries do not have neurorehabilitation services. There is a gross discrepancy between the demand and need of neurorehabilitation services as well service providers. The pandemic has further strained the already stressed neurorehabilitation sector in developing countries. Due to the increase in the number of people affected by COVID 19, the emergency rooms, ICUs & wards are converted for Covid19 patients which led to a decrease in admissions of patients with neurological conditions that require post acute rehabilitation in a hospital in patient set up. Many public hospitals are converted for management of COVID 19 patients and other speciality including neurology and rehabilitation are affected badly and therefore the burden of family members has increased as they have to provide rehabilitation at home during this pandemic.

For those that are privileged to receive inpatient rehabilitation services face another challenge that the relatives are no longer allowed to visit patients, causes reduction in emotional stimulus to the brain. The main concern raised by the rehab professionals was availability of PPE during treatment sessions, close proximity with patient while treating, Duration to treat one patient with minimal risk of infection and whether cater to inpatient or provide outpatient services also. Many outpatient rehabilitation units are converted into institutional quarantine facilities by the local governing bodies, however recently few hospital had started Rehab services but the response of patients was poor due to fear and non-availability of transport. In this testing time Tele-consultation and Tele-rehabilitation has been started by many experts for patients who do not have access to in person rehabilitation or as follow up, However developing countries poses few obstacles in such services due to non availability of smart phones, low bandwidth of connections, illiteracy & lack of training among health workers and caregivers in providing neurorehabilitation. Inclusion of family in the process of rehabilitation along with tele-rehabilitation works well in mild and chronic cases, but in post-acute neurological disability providing a multidisciplinary setting is of utmost importance which cannot be provided due to COVID 19 pandemic.

The medical and rehab education during these times is provided thru webinars & online teaching workshops by various institutes, universities & professional bodies. These helped in providing training to young professionals in various countries by top faculties across the globe. Tele- rehabilitation and online teaching webinars could be the future during the post COVID era. Challenges which will be faced in future are a) training in Telerehabilitation, b) development of App based uniform rehab protocols with standardisation and c) Policies for proper and safe use of patient data during tele-rehabilitation. World Federation of Neurorehabilitation along with local Associations like IFNR could play an important role in making a platform for Tele-rehabilitation.