

Impact and readiness of Malaysian Ministry of Health pain clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Chronic pain significantly impacts the patient's quality of life. The COVID-19 pandemic diverted healthcare resources toward infection control, potentially disrupting pain management. This study investigates the impact and preparedness of Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) pain clinics towards the pandemic. **Methods:** A retrospective cross-sectional mixed-method approach was employed, using an adapted questionnaire to gather data from 15 MOH pain clinics via the REDCap platform. **Results:** The response rate was 93.33%. Results revealed that pain clinic services were disrupted during the pandemic (years 2020-2021), with a significant median reduction of 18.25% ($p=0.004$) in the number of clinic cases compared to pre-pandemic years (2018-2019). 85.7% of clinics reported their patients experienced increased pain or reduced functionality due to pain. Eight out of ten clinics had to discontinue interventional procedures during the pandemic, leading to a significant drop in procedure numbers ($p=0.010$). Urgent procedures were only conducted for severe cancer pain or uncontrollable cases. To adapt to the pandemic, 92.85% of clinics offered telehealth consultation, but challenges such as poor internet and telephone service hindered effective virtual care. Despite this, most clinics (92.85%) consider remote consultation as an acceptable alternative to in-person consultation, emphasizing the need for improvements in IT support and general infrastructure. **Conclusion:** This study highlights the sidelining of pain medicine services during the pandemic, posing challenges in ensuring continuity of care for patients. Remote consultation is a viable alternative. However, to ensure consistent service, there is a pressing need to enhance basic infrastructure.