



ACCESS TO OUTPATIENT CARE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious challenge to patients in terms of access to outpatient physicians. The purpose of this article is to present and analyze the opinion of patients about their access to GPs and specialists in outpatient care in the conditions of COVID-19. A survey was conducted among 340 patients who visited their GP and 258 patients visited a Specialized Outpatient Care (SOC) dermatologist in Sofia in the period 1st Oct. - 30th Nov. 2020. The respondents' opinion on the ways to make an appointment with the doctor, the waiting time for an examination in front of the office, the possibility for online consultations with the doctor through an internet platform and their satisfaction were studied. The results show that 66.7% of the patients who visited their GP and 34.8% of the patients who visited a dermatologist did not have an appointment. Only 15.2% of GP patients and 7% of dermatologist patients have used an online consultation on a specific problem, with 28.6% of GP patients and only 15.3% of those with a specialist satisfied with the consultation.

Key words: access, outpatient care, online consultation

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a serious challenge in terms of health, economic and psychosocial matter. Social isolation, changes in lifestyle, lack of predictability and many conflicting data, including from experts, as well as patients' access to outpatient doctors, are serious challenges to the resilience of each individual and the health system. GPs are the patient's first contact with the healthcare system, which is why it is necessary to study and analyze whether there have been changes in patients' access to GPs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this article is to present and analyze the opinion of patients about their access to GPs and specialists in outpatient care in the context of COVID 19.

In order to achieve the set goal, the following tasks have been performed:

1. Clarification of the essence of the concept of "access" to medical care.
2. Research and analysis of patients' opinions on how to make an appointment with a doctor.
3. Examination of the waiting time for examination in front of the cabinet.
4. Analysis of the possibilities for online consultations with the doctor through a platform on the Internet.
5. Evaluation of patients' satisfaction with the received online consultations.

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6. Formulation of conclusions and recommendations on improving the access of patients to GPs and specialists in outpatient care.

METHODS

A documentary and survey method was used to objectify the observed results. Literature sources in the field of access to outpatient care have been studied.

In order to study and analyze the opinion of patients regarding their access to GPs and specialists in outpatient care in the conditions of COVID 19, a pilot survey was conducted from 1st Oct. to 30th Nov. 2020 in the city of Sofia among patients who visited their personal doctors and a SOC dermatologist in the specified period. 340 patients who visited their personal doctor and 258 patients who visited a SOC dermatologist in Sofia during the study period were interviewed.

The choice is random - there is no selection of respondents, which gives grounds to claim representativeness of the results. The confidence interval at significance level $P(t) = 0.05$ provides information for assessing the accuracy of the analyzed indicators.

Quantitative analyzes were performed with a statistical package of application programs - SPSS 17.0. MICROSOFT OFFICE products are used for tabular and graphic processing and presentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

A key component in public health system assessments is patients' access to health care. Access is a complex and multifactorial concept for which there is no single and universal definition. According to the WHO, access to medical care is defined as: "long-term, organized provision of medical care that is geographically, financially, culturally and functionally easily accessible to the whole society, and which in its volume and quantity satisfies and is adequate to the needs of people and is done through methods and practices acceptable to them" (1, 2). In general, access to health services is understood as the timely receipt of medical care by people in need and without serious restrictions, according to the needs of individuals regardless of their financial capabilities. The concept of access is

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associated with a number of other concepts and characteristics of the health system, such as:

- ✓ Right to health and access to health services;
- ✓ Access and quality of medical care;
- ✓ Fairness;
- ✓ Equality;
- ✓ Efficiency and effectiveness;

According to the legislation in Bulgaria, access to medical care is "the right of every citizen to receive medical care" under the conditions and procedure regulated by the Health Act and the Health Insurance Act. The right to affordable medical care is exercised through application of the following principles (3, 4):

- ✓ timeliness, sufficiency and quality of medical care;
- ✓ equality in the provision of medical care with priority for children, pregnant women and mothers of children up to 1 year;
- ✓ cooperation, consistency and coordination of the activities between the medical establishments;
- ✓ respect for the rights of the patient.

The conditions and the procedure for exercising the right of access to medical care shall be determined by an ordinance of the Council of Ministers. Health insured persons in the Republic of Bulgaria have the right to receive medical care within the scope of the basic package of health activities guaranteed by the budget of the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF), which guarantees affordable treatment in accordance with the stage, development, gravity and severity of the disease (5).

In order to study and analyze some aspects of the respondents' access to the doctor they visited in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, we developed two separate questionnaires - one for patients visiting their GP and one for patients visiting a dermatologist in Specialized outpatient care. The answers of the respondents were collected after the examination at the respective doctor during the study period.

Of the 340 patients surveyed, 84.8% were women and 15.2% were men. The distribution by sex of 258 patients who visited a SOC dermatologist was 68.2% women and 31.8% men.

When asked if they have easy access to the doctor they visited, 97.1% of the respondents who visited their GP answered positively, while only 33.7% of

the patients who visited a dermatologist had the same opinion. **(Figure 1)**

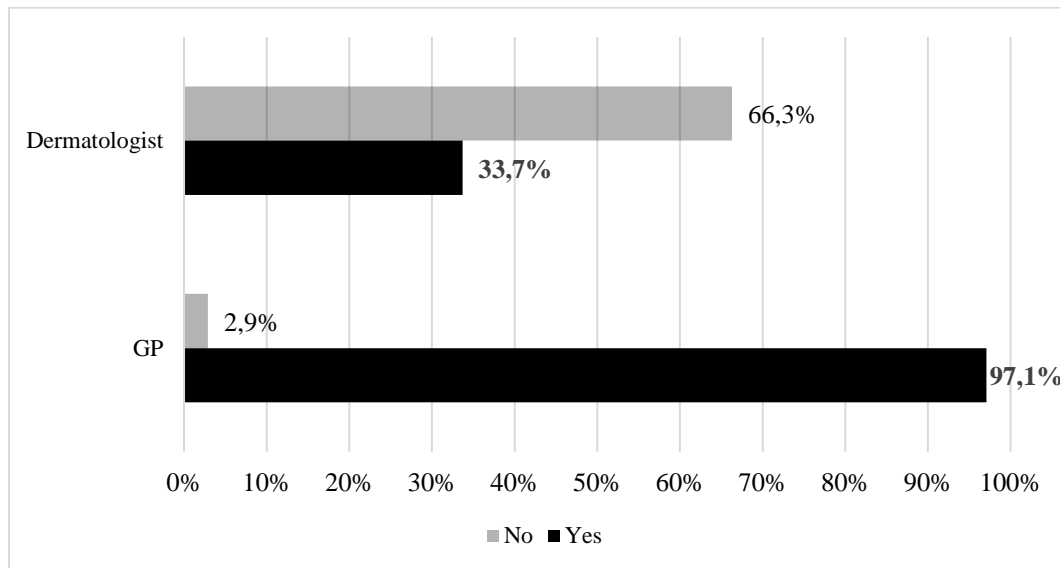


Figure 1. Frequency of distribution of respondents regarding the availability of easy access to the doctor they visit

In order to avoid the crowding of patients in front of the examination rooms, most of the doctors have introduced a system for pre-booking an appointment for an examination. In this regard, the next question in the questionnaires is asked in order to determine whether patients make an appointment in advance with the doctor and how they do it. The results show that 66.7% of the

patients who visited the GP and 34.8% of the respondents who visited a dermatologist did not have an appointment for an examination with the respective doctor, which leads to crowds in front of the offices and conflicts between patients waiting for an examination, rarely between patients and physicians. **(Figure 2)**

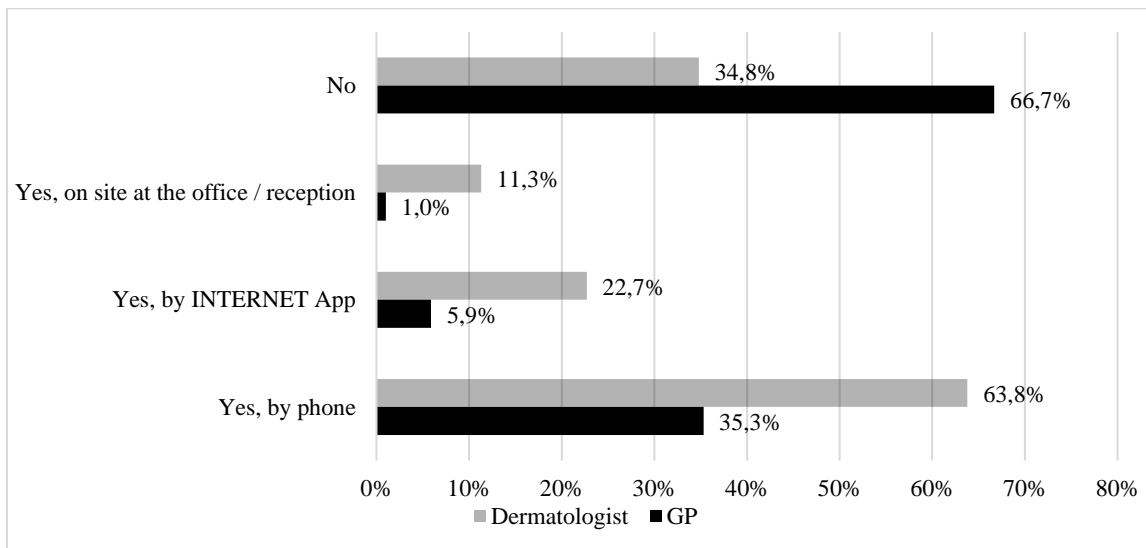


Figure 2. Frequency of distribution of respondents regarding the availability and manner of pre-booking the examination at the respective doctor

63.8% of patients visiting a dermatologist most often make an appointment by phone, and 35.3% of the patients who visited GPs use this method of booking an appointment. 22.7% of the respondents with the specialist and only 5.9% of the patients with GPs use an Internet application. 11.2% of the patients who visited a specialist and only 1% of those who visited a personal doctor made an appointment at the reception or on the spot in their office. These results show that a very large proportion of patients are not accustomed to making an appointment with a doctor and do not take advantage of the opportunity to avoid crowding in front of offices, especially in the context of a pandemic of COVID 19. It is necessary to work with medical professionals in outpatient care in order to increase the health culture of patients and use all available opportunities to comply with anti-epidemic

measures in order to prevent the spread of COVID 19.

We found an influence on the age of the interviewed patients who visited the dermatologist regarding the way of pre-booked appointment with the doctor. Among the respondents under the age of thirty and between the ages of thirty-one and forty, the most numerous are those who give priority to booking an appointment with an Internet application, 58.8% and 50.8%, respectively, and among the respondents between the ages of fifty-one and sixty years, the priority method is to book an exam by phone (45.9%), while patients between forty-one and fifty years give equal importance to booking an exam by phone (41.2%) and via an Internet application (41,2%). As expected, patients over 60 years of age prefer to book an appointment with a specialist at the reception or in the office - 51.4% (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Influence of age on the opinion of the surveyed patients who visited the dermatologist about the preferred way of pre-booked appointment for examination

| How to record an appointment for an examination | Age Groups | | | | |
|---|------------|------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| | to 30years | 31-40years | 41-50years | 51 – 60years | over 60years |
| By phone | 32,1% | 42,3% | 41,2% | 45,9% | 31,1% |
| With internet application | 58,8% | 50,8% | 41,1% | 14,6% | 8,2% |
| On site at the office / reception | 1,3% | 2,4% | 13,5% | 33,9% | 51,4% |
| I don't make an appointment | 7,8% | 4,5% | 4,2% | 5,6% | 9,3% |

In the last year, in the conditions of a global COVID-19 pandemic, the application of online consultations has marked a huge growth and demand worldwide. In many cases, it is one of the few ways in which doctors can take care of their patients. There is an indisputable advantage of this type of communication in consultations, when no physical contact is required, in patients with chronic diseases, in psychological help, in reading test results, in giving advice on continuing outpatient treatment of patients with

acute or chronic disease when no secondary examination is required. Given the stated advantages of this type of consultation, we asked a question that seeks to determine whether patients use online consultations with doctors through a platform on the Internet. The analysis of the obtained results shows that only 15.2% of the GP patients and only 7% of the dermatologist patients used online consultation on a specific problem during the study period. (**Figure 3**)

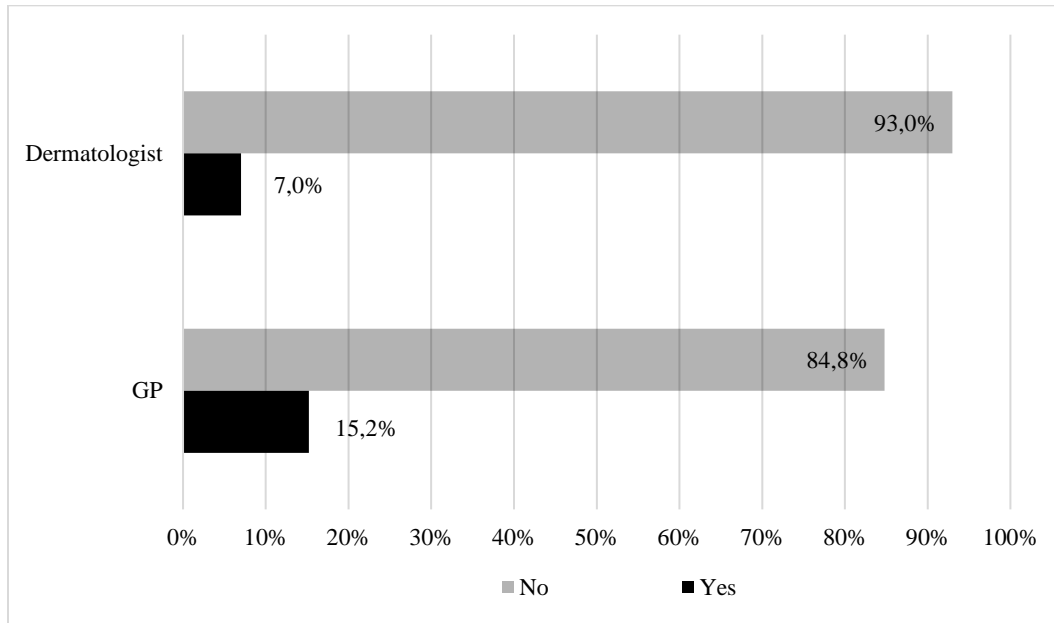


Figure 3. Frequency of distribution of respondents according to the use of online consultations by the respective doctor

The obtained results suggest the necessity for a wider information campaign among patients about the benefits of online consultations with media involvement in this process.

question from the survey. The results show that 28.6% of the GP patients and only 15.3% of the specialist patients are satisfied with the received consultation. **(Figure 4)**

To find out how satisfied patients are with the online consultations, we asked the following

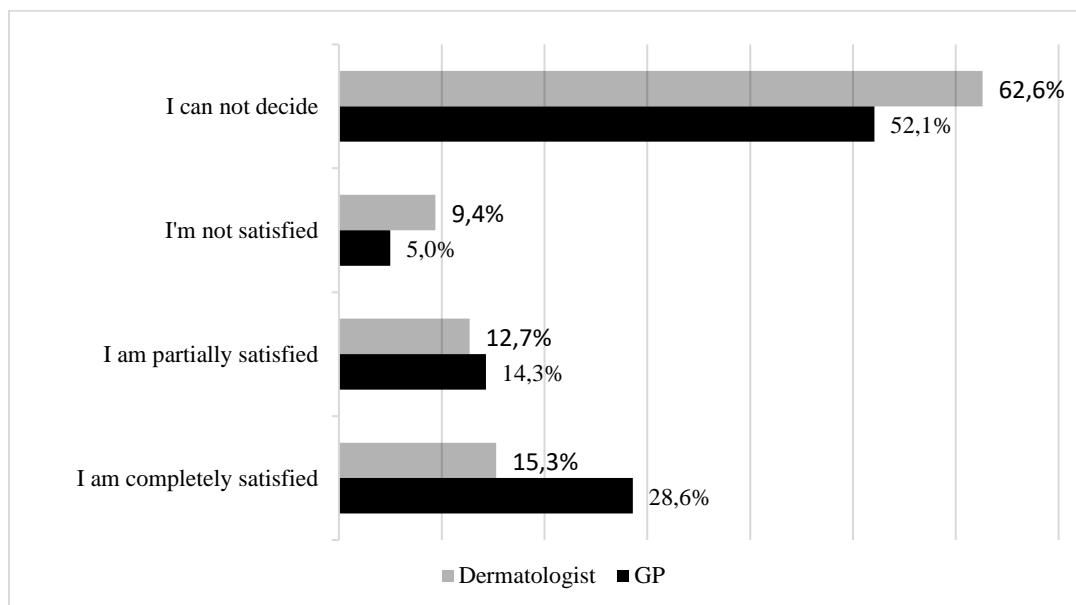


Figure 4. Frequency of distribution of respondents according to their satisfaction with the online consultations conducted by the respective doctor

5% of GP patients and 9.4% of dermatologist patients are dissatisfied with the online consultation. 52.1% of respondents consulted online by their GP and 62.6% of those consulted by a dermatologist could not assess their satisfaction with the consultation, which is a worrying fact.

Based on the study conducted among patients on their access to GPs and specialists in outpatient care in the context of COVID 19, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The majority of patients who visited their GP (66.7%) and almost a third (34.8%) of patients who visited a dermatologist did not have an appointment.
2. Online consultation on a specific problem was used by only 15.2% of GP patients and 7% of dermatologist patients, as 42.9% of GP patients and only 28% of those at the specialist were satisfied with the received consultation in different degree.
3. The influence of the age of the surveyed patients who visited the dermatologist on the way of pre-recorded appointment with the doctor is established, as the respondents up to forty years of age give priority to booking an appointment with internet application, and those over 60 prefer to make an appointment for an examination with the receptionist or in the office.

The recommendations we address to the National association of general practitioners in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Medical Association and patient organizations in order to improve the access of patients to outpatient care in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic is to conduct information campaigns among patients with the help of the media in order to:

- ✓ clarify the need to make an appointment in advance in order to avoid the accumulation of patients in front of the offices;
- ✓ raise the health culture regarding the use of all provided opportunities for compliance

with anti-epidemic measures in order to prevent the spread of COVID 19;

- ✓ present the advantages of the online consultations provided by the doctors when it is possible to solve the patient's health problem in this way.

CONCLUSIONS

Patients' access to outpatient care, as one of the elements of the quality of the provided health services, must be studied and analyzed in depth and comprehensively. An important condition for the satisfaction of patients in outpatient care is the unimpeded access to GPs and SOC specialists. This requires, especially in the context of a pandemic of COVID-19, outpatient care doctors and patients to make full use of the possibilities of online consultations and pre-booking appointments.

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