Receding hairline? Aching tooth? Just Skype your doc

WIRED Patients are now using video-chat facilities to connect with the specialists of their choice anywhere in the country, particularly for initial consultations in dentistry, dermatology

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Roshan Jain was getting married in eight weeks earlier this year, and an eye infection that had persisted for as long was refusing to fade.

The 26-year-old businessman from Durg, Chhattisgarh, had tried everything — several doctors, a series of tests, antibiotics and eye drops. The eye remained itchy and gallingly red.

Desperate, he logged on to the internet and began searching for a good ophthalmologist. One of the first names that appeared was Mayur Moreker, a consultant eye surgeon at Bombay Hospital.

"I sent him my test reports via email, hoping for a medical opinion. Instead, he directed me to his brother, Dr Sunil, who offered to take a look via Skype," says Jain, referring to the free internet video call application.

A consultant eye surgeon at Cumballa Hill Hospital, Dr Sunil examined Jain's eye during a 10-minute video chat, with Jain's family doctor standing by to discuss his medical history and write out the prescription.

Over the following two weeks, Jain and his GP logged in for regular status checks with Dr Sunil in Mumbai. Then, in end-March, they set a date for surgery. "I flew down to Mumbai on the day of the operation and flew home two days later," he says. "Though I live 11,000 km away, I managed to get treated by one of the best doctors in the country. And I barely had to leave the house."

Jain also underwent post-surgical treatment via Skype, with sessions four or five times a week, and Jain's family doctor changing the dressings and monitoring his recovery.

"By mid-April, a whole month before my wedding, my ghostly eye was back to normal," says Jain.

In an age when broadband has shrunk spaces, allowing families to connect and youngsters to make friends around the world, patients are beginning to use video-chat and videoconferencing technology to seek basic treatment and follow-ups from the best doctors in the country, from the comfort of their own homes.

Homeopath Dr Anita Salunkhe chats with a patient via Skype. But experts warn patients that to avoid all risk they should go in for such consultations only initially and for routine follow-ups. RAJENDRA GAWANKAR/HT PHOTO

"Most urban homes now have an internet connection, and consultations via video chat and online applications are therefore catching on because it's an easy, affordable way for a remote patient to connect with the doctor of their choice anywhere in the country," says Uma Nambiar, a hospital administrator and zonal director for Fortis Healthcare in Greater Mumbai and CEO of SL Raheja Hospital, Mahim. "Even within the same city, such consultations enable patients to avoid long commutes and a long wait at the clinic. Instead, they just log in at home and fix an e-appointment."

While the trend is catching on rapidly in fields such as dentistry, dermatology, homeopathy and cosmetic surgery, doctors urge caution, saying these e-appointments must only be used for initial consultations and follow-ups in simple cases.

At homeopath Anita Salunkhe's Mindheal clinic in Chembur, the video-chat option is used for initial case history sessions with patients from across the country and for routine follow-ups.

Even for local patients, this option helps save time. For Chembur homemaker Lakhsmi Ramasundaran, 48, for instance, a migraine attack no longer means she has to leave her 83-year-old mother alone at home and rush to the clinic. "Instead, I log on for an e-appointment," she says. In all, Salunkhe conducts about 70 e-appointments per month, up from 10 a year ago.

Haryana-based homeopath Dr Vimal Kumar Dhawan, national president of the Indian Homeopathic Medical Association, says his practice has also seen a rise in e-appointments, to about 20 e-consultations a month from eight a year ago. "Many of these patients are from neighbouring states such as Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. They e-mail me their medical history and we discuss their cases online," says Dhawan. "As treatment progresses, though, every patient is required to visit in person."

Overall, doctors that offer these facilities say they have seen the number of e-appointments rise by 7% to 20% over the past year, mainly in streams such as dentistry, cosmetology and dermatology.

"After all," says Mumbai-based cosmetic surgeon Meenakshi Agarwal. "people don't need to come all the way to my clinic just to have their initial questions answered and get a quotation."

One such long-distance cosmetic patient was Noida-based, 40-something corporate vice-president Sanjeev (who did not want us to use his last name), who was looking for a hair transplant.

"I wanted the best because I didn't want the procedure to go haywire later, leaving me with a shrub-like structure on my head," he says, laughing.

A friend directed Sanjeev to Agarwal. He then consulted her via video-chat, sent her his routine blood and urine reports via email and then fixed a date for the procedure. "I flew down on the day of the surgery and flew back to Noida the same night," he says.

Back at the eye clinic at Cumballa Hill, Morekar says 20% of his new patients now first consult with him online. "It's catching on so quickly," he says, "that I've added my Skype ID to my visiting card."