

Remote Appraisals: What is the Virtual Reality?

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Context:

'The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically transformed the terrain of our life and healthcare system'¹, forcing many of us to adapt the way we work. Prior to the pandemic, very few medical appraisals were virtual. Since October 2020, all were virtual until recently. Digital technology has disrupted normal patterns of human interaction² and can impact on people's ability to connect and care for one another³.

Question:

What impact has conducting appraisals virtually had on the appraisal discussion?



Methods:

In this qualitative study, five experienced appraisers (four female, one male) volunteered to take part in a remote focus group discussion about virtual appraisal. Personal reflections on virtual appraisal, from the viewpoint of an appraiser and doctor being appraised, were used for triangulation. Data from the focus group transcript, field notes and reflections were analysed using thematic and content analysis.

Outcomes:

Word picture of frequently used 'buzz' words':



Appraisers and doctors spoke positively about their experiences of virtual appraisal. One said 'I can honestly say that I do not think the virtual context impacted on my appraisal discussions'.

The outcome was overwhelmingly positive. Positive themes included the opportunity for doctors to talk, receive support and share sensitive information, flexibility and no travel.

Communication challenges included building rapport, difficulty seeing body language, use of silence, expressing emotions and empathy, issues with internet connection and ensuring privacy/confidentiality.

Quotes:

Quotes highlighting themes from the data:

'It's interesting about silence. I can think of one example where the doctor thought that the Zoom had cut out when I used silence.'

'I have been blown away by how quickly people forget that you're not in the same room with them'

'I was amazed at how much personal information people share with you on a virtual platform'

'We're missing all those non-verbal cues and we have to act differently.'

'Zoom empathy is difficult.'

'I have found it relatively easy to build rapport with the doctors I appraised, even those who I had not met before.'

Word cloud highlighting themes that emerged:



Conclusion:

Overall appraisers' experience of virtual appraisal was very positive. All agreed that conducting appraisals virtually did not affect the connectiveness between doctor and appraiser.

Although communication issues were highlighted, all appraisers had developed their practice to maximise their effectiveness in the virtual context.

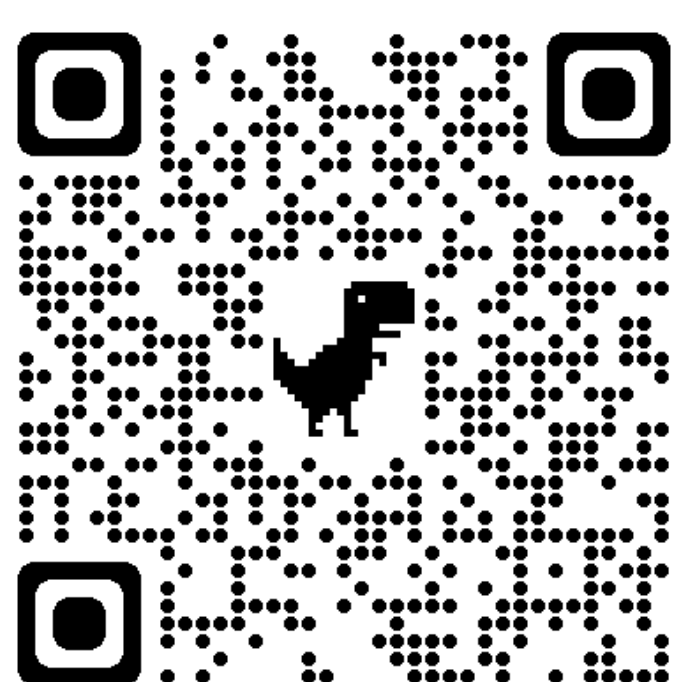
Take home message:

This study showed that the reality of virtual appraisals could be very positive. The option to facilitate appraisals remotely in future supports flexibility and sustainability.

References:

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2. Terry C, Cain J. The Emerging Issue of Digital Empathy. American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education May 2016, 80 (4) 58; DOI: 10.5688/ajpe80458
3. Lawrence K. Digital empathy in the age of coronavirus. BMJ blog. August 24, 2020

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