Online Translation Tools as an Adjunct in Teleconsultations

Language barriers can lead to miscommunications during patient consultations and result in both errors and decreased patient satisfaction. Studies have explored the role of translation tools like “Google Translate” to overcome this problem and have suggested that these online translation tools can significantly improve the quality of consultation when language is a barrier.[1‑3] This would be especially relevant in geographical areas with large expatriate populations or with a wide variety of languages, where both the health-care worker and the patient might have language-related difficulties. However, the main limitation is that validation of these tools in real-life situations is limited and they can be associated with risks to patient safety.[4]

These tools come with many advantages like the ease of use and access, with the apps being available on smartphones across platforms.[5] Moreover, the quality of translation and artificial intelligence capabilities have increased substantially over time. Additional tools (like Google Lens) can also be used to translate other documents (e.g., reports, notes, or prescriptions). Use of voice translate can be used for visually impaired.

One area where these translation tools can have significant impact is teledermicine. We have tried to use Google Translate as an adjunct to our virtual teledermatology consultations, which have become more common in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been using Microsoft Teams® for our virtual consults and audio, video, and the chat box for communication. Getting dedicated trained translators is not easy even in actual hospital settings, and more so in the context of virtual consultations. We feel that Google Translate is a simple and effective tool to improve the quality of teleconsultations when there are language barriers. We find it especially useful in explaining instructions for treatment. The practice we tried is to use Google Translate mainly to translate either the patient comments in the chatbox to English or to translate and then paste the translation for our comments (for clarifications in history or for instructions in case of prescriptions). Our experience related to the use of online translation tools is limited to less than 25 patients (and 2 dermatologists). Some specialties, like dermatology, where the imaging is more important in the diagnosis, are probably better suited to the use of translation tools as an adjunct. However, it goes without saying that as of now we can recommend this only as an adjunct and that too in non-emergency cases. It is sometimes cumbersome to use this along with the video/audio consult. Local medicolegal legislations must also be considered before using these tools in teleconsultations. While there are a few studies which have evaluated the effectiveness of translation tools in medical consultations,[2,3] the use of the same in telemedicine is an area which has not been explored much. Proper studies are required to validate the use of translation tools in teledermicine.

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Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.
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