

Virtual realities: Changes in clinic efficiency and obstacles in the transition to virtual clinics

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Background: KNIGHTS Clinic is a student-run free clinic that serves the uninsured population of downtown Orlando. The clinic is operated by a board of 38 students; 20 are Student Provider Experts who provide continuity of care to our patient population. High efficiency in clinic flow is important because it ensures quality care to our patients.

Methods: Due to COVID-19, KNIGHTS Clinic halted in-person clinic operations in March 2020. In August 2020, we introduced virtual clinics to provide care for our patients. Four in-person clinics completed before the shutdown and four virtual clinics held during the pandemic were compared for clinic efficiency. Study endpoints are clinic efficiency, challenges to clinic flow, and student satisfaction.

Results: Clinic efficiency and student satisfaction were measured via a student self-reported survey, scaled from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent). We observed an increase in clinic efficiency from a weighted average of 3.58 in-person to 4.16 virtually ($p = 0.0027$). While many challenges to in-person and virtual clinics were environmentally unique (e.g., internet quality for virtual calls), challenges associated with interpretation/translation significantly decreased with virtual care ($p < 0.0001$). Finally, we compared satisfaction scores between students who acted as interviewers (their expected role) and as scribes (an adjustment for virtual clinic): average scores showed little difference (4.09 vs 4.00) but with no statistical significance ($p = 0.8$).

Conclusions: While initial barriers hindered our ability to provide care at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we adapted to providing virtual visits, which have shown greater clinic efficiency compared to the previous in-person clinics. These observations reveal important improvements based on virtual clinics, particularly in the potential elimination of challenges for interpretation barriers, that should be considered for continued integration as we look to future clinics with a return to in-person visits.