

**BRIDGING THE GAP THROUGH TELEMEDICINE:
IMPROVING SURGICAL ACCESS IN UNDERSERVED DISTRICTS IN SABAH**

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Introduction: Despite being the second largest state in Malaysia, Sabah is still behind in economic development and infrastructures limiting mobility and access of its people. This state has further fallen into slumber when the COVID-19 pandemic hits. Telemedicine is a powerful tool that allows medical care to reach the underserved portions of the populations living in rural areas. We describe the advantages of utilizing telemedicine in Breast and Endocrine surgical patients coming from remote districts in Sabah.

Methods: *Virtual clinic* was initiated in 2021 to address the logistic and financial burdens faced by post-operative Breast and Endocrine patients living in the remote districts during the pandemic to come for follow-up. 1 liaison medical officer was appointed from each of the 17 district hospitals in Sabah. Upon discharge, patient's case summaries were uploaded in individual folders created in '*cloud drive*'. These folders were made accessible to liaison officers in the district hospitals. Appointment dates were scheduled via Online *calendar*. On the day of appointment, patients attended their local hospitals, and in the company of liaison medical officers were seen by a Breast and Endocrine specialist via online meeting platform (real-time). We analysed the traveling costs and journey time required by patients from different districts to come for follow-up.

Result: A total of 100 and 224 patients were seen via *virtual clinic* in 2021 and 2022 respectively. Through *virtual clinic*, patients are able to save on an average of RM 200 on transportation expenses and an average of 3.5 hours of travel time for a follow-up.

Conclusion: Telemedicine enables continuation of specialist care, irrespective of location. Due to its cost-effectiveness, telemedicine remains significant in Sabah even in the post-pandemic period. Recognizing the importance of establishing competence in telemedicine, steps need to be taken to address its limitations, which are mainly contributed by lack of hardware and internet access.