**A pandemic of Webinars: Critical appraisal based on ethical perspectives**

**Abstract:**

Due to the countrywide lockdown in view of COVID-19 pandemic, in person scientific events had come to a halt. The internet-based interactive platforms have come to rescue during this crisis for dissemination of information. There is possibility that the Webinars may become the mode of knowledge share in the post-COVID era. Hence, it is crucial to ponder upon the way the Webinars are being conducted at present and to consider perspectives of the various parties involved in this system. The Ethical principles laid down in ICMR guidelines such as essentiality, voluntariness, social responsibility, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, professional competence and institutional arrangements can be implemented at various stages of Webinars viz. planning, conduct and impact assessment of the Webinars.

**Key-words:** COVID-19, online teaching, stakeholders, ethics

**Background:**

The COVID-19 pandemic impelled several countries to implement lockdown from national quarantines to closures of teaching institutes1. Since more than a third of the planet’s population was under lockdown, conduct of scientific events such as seminars, conferences, workshops, meetings etc. had virtually halted. During this time of crisis, online platforms gained more popularity for dissemination of information2. Because of the easy access to such platforms, the educational institutions found an easy way out to stay connected with their students and peers and to continue with their educational programs without the need to move out of their homes3. On the lines of online teaching, which was thought to be inevitable in order to save the student fraternity from losing their time, organizing Webinars too gained momentum4.

The word ‘Webinar’, coined out of a combination of ‘web’ and ‘seminar’, is very easily understood as a means of conducting a seminar on the internet5. A laptop or any smart device with internet connection is all that is required to have access to a Webinar. To be more precise, Webinar is an online academic event, where experts in a field deliver their talks on a pre-defined theme in the form of presentations, / lectures/ discussions etc. The presenters convey the information to the attendees through audio, /video clips, web-based online demonstrations/ or through slide presentations and the end users can at times, interact with the presenters to ask questions or seek additional guidance6.

During the period of pandemic-related lockdown, these webinars were welcomed initially by the scientific and academic fraternity. They were considered as ‘efficient utilization of time’ then. However, over a period of last 6-7 months, the webinars are found to be eventually over-flooding leading to what many mockingly refer to as ‘pandemic’ of Webinars. Hosting a webinar became a sort of rat-race where every academic and research institution wanted to host a Webinar to attract the attention of the community without even assessing the need for such an event, and often without possessing any competence and expertise to conduct such events. The major concerns being raised in this context include the repetition of topics, overlapping of audience and dilution of the rigor and depth of the subject being discussed. It is estimated that the number of webinars conducted since March 2020 is considerably high compared to the number of seminars, conferences, workshops that would have been otherwise conducted in normal situations in the absence of the pandemic. Low cost of organizing and participating, maximum reach, a high visibility and the comfort of attending the event sitting at home- is what has made such events attractive and popular.

Considering the global situation, it looks like conduct of Webinars is not going away any time soon. There are high chances that Webinars would become ‘New normal’ and replace the real / in person meetings. It is therefore crucial to visit and discuss some of the realities and nitty-gritties of webinars from the perspective of different stakeholders. The focus of discussion in this communication is restricted to medical and other healthcare related disciplines.

**Organizers:**

The organizers of the Webinars fall under the following broad categories: a) Governmental research and funding agencies, b) all kinds of educational institutes (universities or colleges), c) professional bodies / societies /associations / scholarly journals, d) pharmaceutical and other related industry such as the manufacturers of biomedical equipment. The participants of these Webinars are generally students/ faculties/ members/ associates or other users and ‘knowledge aspirants’ from the field. Although the Webinars are planned with an altruistic cause of professional commitment, at times they may be with vested interest of marketing the institute / organization / products by creating indirect publicity for generating scores in various Institutional Ranking Systems etc. With the same objective, many a times a prefix ‘National’ or ‘International’ is attached to the Webinar title. All the Webinars are conducted using web-based software and many of them are then live-streamed over-social media platforms. This obviously transcends the geographical limits and as such all Webinars can be considered International.

Since the Webinars are being organized amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, current statistics and management of the disease (individual and public health level) have been the most preferred topics. These topics may not always be of interest to a common student/participant. Further, there are a few criteria for selection of technical experts/resource persons of Webinars, such as experience in the concerned subject/ area, techno-savviness, ability to communicate with the group etc.7 However, it is often observed that availability of the resource person on a stipulated day takes precedence over other essential qualities, and the ‘conduct’ of the Webinar becomes more important than ‘content’ of the Webinar.

There are certain subtle ethical issues involved in conducting the webinars. For example, most of the times the invitations to the experts are sent through informal social networking platforms. A formal invitation mentioning details such as target audience, expected content, recording and live streaming of lectures, future use of recorded videos and their copyright, willingness of presenters for live streaming etc. are rarely conveyed to the presenters. The lack of information to presenters regarding these points has become a matter of concern for many presenters. The acceptance of invitation by a presenter, ideally, should not be considered as blanket permission to post the recorded videos on social sites; however, this has been happening more often than not. If the organizers have a convincing reason for recording the Webinar to reproduce, exhibit, distribute, broadcast, digitize, edit, or otherwise use such recording in whole or in part, for any unpaid academic, research, or other purposes, the best way to do this is to inform the presenter at the time of invitation and seek the presenter’s written permission. Since the data is being stored in a digital format, its possible future form of use must be made known to the presenter as the primary copyright holder of such creative content always happens to be the speaker.

The registration-fee structure of these Webinars is also an important point to discuss. While some Webinars are free, some attract a good amount of registration fees as per the organizer’s policy. In any of these cases, it is observed that many a times, no respectable honorarium is offered to the presenters. The expertise and time of the presenters is taken for granted by many of the organizers. Most of the times, no acknowledgement is given to presenters in the form of a certificate after they have successfully delivered the Webinar. Similar concerns are noted from the perspective of participants, where the participants pay some fee to register, however they are never approached for a feedback as to whether the event was perceived as ‘value for money’ or not!

**Presenter:**

In this tidal wave of Webinars, it is observed that many new budding presenters have emerged in almost every field. The foremost reason for this emergence may be their easy availability and no demand from them for honorarium. Professional commitment and excellence often take a backseat in such situations when these unexperienced speakers grab the opportunity to become visible online. Professional ethics as well as a sense of vocation are lacking many a times as the new presenters are more interested in making their online presence felt than in making the participants understand the topic. The real purpose of the Webinar, dissemination of information, thereby imparting knowledge to participants, does not get fulfilled in such a scenario. On the other hand, some of the well-known figures make use of these platforms to flaunt their popularity and are seen participating in every other webinar in their field. This too does not serve the purpose as many a times they may not have anything new to speak. Lastly, there are a few really good presenters who seem to get lost and are not aptly identified.

**Participants:**

As the organizers and presenters are integral to the successful conduct of an event, so is the participants. Webinars definitely offer more flexibility, ease of access and convenience to participants; as compared to seminars. Participants can attend it at any time and from the location of their convenience, using a smart device and an internet connection.

The entire event organization is for the participant, however from the recent experiences of Webinars, the participant seems to be the most overlooked entity. At times, the participants are forced to register themselves in Webinars as the events are often made compulsory for undergraduate and postgraduate students of the same institute whereas, for research enthusiasts and faculty members they maybe voluntary. The attendees may not be always attentive or sincerely listening to lectures as there is no such mechanism available to check the attention of the participants. Many a times participants may keep their systems running so as to show their presence in order to grab the certificate of participation, that too on multiple devices and in multiple events at the same time! Acquiring inputs for generation of knowledge becomes secondary to attendance in such cases. The issue of attendance is vital in Webinars where specific number of credit scores are recognized by the statutory councils.

Attendees with paid participations may be really interested in the subject matter being discussed in the particular Webinar as involvement of money always makes one more serious.

**Discussion**:

Amid COVID-19 crisis, Webinars have become common tools for delivering and discussing the information. They can be considered as emerging ‘teaching-learning’ modes during and post-COVID era. Therefore, it becomes necessary to understand few ground realities about conduct and impact of the Webinars.

The technical infrastructure and human elements remain critical in effective implementation of Webinars. Technical glitches at live events can often be made up for, using verbal explanations & gestures which are not possible on virtual platform. Every participant handles a different computer, with a distinct operating system configuration, internet connection speed and software. Compatibility can be a concern at times. These issues have to be taken into consideration during these Webinars.

If the Webinars are conducted for closed groups and for discussion on some critical issue, where presenters share their personal experiences in their respective fields, it may not be advisable to upload such Webinars on the social platforms. The importance of subject matter, consent of the presenter, short term outcomes as well as long term impacts of the Webinar should be evaluated before uploading/ live streaming the Webinars on such platforms.

One of the matters of concern involved in Webinars is ‘how to know if one has really attended a full Webinar or has simply left his/ her device running on’. There has to be a mechanism in place to ensure active participation and attention of participants throughout the Webinar, especially if credits are going to be awarded at the end of the Webinar. To address this, an online examination or assessment can be conducted after the completion of the event but before certification. The certificate should be issued to successful candidates only instead of issuing just participation certificates to all who registered for the Webinar, which seems to be difficult to implement if it involves registration fees. There is also a problem to ensure foolproof assessment of the participants through online mode. Even if certificates are issued by the organizers, do those certificates carry any weightage - remains doubtful.

Another factor to note is that, in live presentations, the presenter has full control of the entire activity and can ensure that there is interruption or distraction of the attendees. This enables the participants to focus more on the speaker. However, in webinars the presenter has no control **of the atmosphere like the speed of internet or the distractions at the participant’s end8.**Webinars can be considered as a newly emerging teaching-learning mode of delivering the content.9 They have the potential to replace the traditional classroom teaching in the long run. However, there is a need for developing guidelines or training manuals for presenters to make effective use of this mode.

Looking at this topic with more depth and critical approach, ethics play a very important role. Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has given ethical guidelines for Bio-Medical Research on human participants.10 Though there is no research component here, being an active entity in a Webinar consumes the most valuable commodity of a person, which is TIME. Respecting others’ time is very pertinent and mandatory at all times. The ethical principles propagated by ICMR need to be considered in the context of conducting of Webinars in the present time. Out of 12 General Principles, following 6 principles are found to be applicable here:

1. **Principle of essentiality:** Before planning the Webinars, the necessity of the Webinar particularly from the participant’s point of view needs to be checked. Unnecessary Webinars would cause not only loss of time and resources but also dilution of purpose of conducting such Webinars. Webinars should not be conducted due to peer pressure or to place institutional work on records.
2. **Principle of voluntariness:** The Webinars conducted by the education institutes are mostly compulsory for their UG and PG students irrespective of their willingness or interest. The faculty of these Institutes is used for pre and post work involved in organizing Webinars.
3. **Principle of social responsibility:** The Webinars should be looked/ considered as a medium that can change attitudes, shape behaviours and can be trend setting. Hence, they should be arranged judiciously and responsibly.
4. **Principle of ensuring privacy and confidentiality:** It is important to maintain privacy of the presenters and participants. If there are plans to upload presentations of Webinars on the social platforms or official websites of the institute, prior information is to be given to presenters as well as active participants. The closed group discussion or sharing personal experiences regarding particular phenomenon should not be made public.
5. **Principle of professional competence:** The presenters engaged should be competent and have the appropriate and relevant qualification, experience and/or training. Altruism and sense of vocation are also important qualities.
6. **Principle of institutional arrangements:** The main prerequisites for holding successful and effective Webinars are the existence of the necessary software and hardware infrastructures, high-speed and accessible Internet, purposeful educational design, as well as empowering, motivating, and encouraging faculty members to participate in such educational programs.

In conclusion, it is important for each stakeholder to be sensitive enough of their rights, responsibilities and limitations before diving into executing Webinars. It is high time that scientific community considers various aspects of Webinars discussed here before endorsing it as knowledge dissemination tool in ‘new normal’ era.

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