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COVID-19: Union health ministry issues guidelines for telemedicine

On SC's direction to encourage patient-doctor interaction. Registered medical practitioners will need to complete an online course

By Jitendra (https://www.downtoearth.org.in/author/jitendra-2086)
Last Updated: Thursday 26 March 2020

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Two days after the Supreme Court ordered guidelines on telemedicine practice in the wake of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare came with the same on March 25, 2020.

The guidelines were prepared in collaboration with NITI Ayog.

Telemedicine comprises remote diagnosis and treatment of patients by means of telecommunications such video, phone, chatting apps, etc.

India did not have any set of guidelines on the practice till now. There is no legal framework to encourage medical practitioners to provide remote medical consultations during a pandemic.

According to the guidelines, only registered medical practitioners (RMP) enrolled in the State Register or the National Register under the Indian Medical Council Act 1956, can practise telemedicine, but

The online program will be developed and made available by the Board of Governors in supersession of the Medical Council of India. All RMPs will need to complete the course within three years of notification of the guidelines to provide consultation via telemedicine.

According to the guidelines, telemedicine consultation should not be anonymous. The RMP should ensure that there is a mechanism for a patient to verify the credentials and contact details of the RMP. Before issuing a prescription, an RMP needs to explicitly ask the age of the patient.

The document also gave information on various aspects of telemedicine, including which platforms can be used for diagnosis and treatment and how the technology can be integrated to provide robust healthcare services.

On March 23, the Supreme Court took up a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) seeking to encourage telemedicine practices to reduce patient-doctor interaction. It asked the health ministry to take a call on the same.

The PIL was filed by Vijay Agarwal, president of non-profit Consortium of Accredited Healthcare Organisations, and health and safety professional Keerthi D'Souza on March 20.

A three-judge bench headed by the Chief Justice of India Sharad Arvind Babode directed the office of Additional Solicitor General of India to ask ministries concerned to look into the matter.

The petition quoted a positive COVID-19 patient in Mumbai who failed to fully disclose his travel history, causing the hospital to be placed under lockdown and several others in isolation.

"Hospitals in India remain at a risk of spreading COVID-19 amongst co-patient and visitors and their family members. India has limited medical resources. Doctors should not be infected during this pandemic," Agarwal said.

Indian medical professionals, however, have been hesitant to offer remote consultations owing to doubts over legality of the practice.

In 2018, the Bombay High Court denied anticipatory bail to gynaecologists who inter alia prescribed medicines over telephone and were prosecuted under Section 304 IPC that deals with punishment for culpable homicides.

Following this incident, several local medical associations issued directives disallowing their members to do remote consultations.

"Telehealth activities and telemedicine require structured guidelines which finally MoHFW has come up with. Now, they have to be disseminated to medical practitioners to help them fight against COVID-19," said Ashwini Goyal, president-elect, Telemedicine Society of India.

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COVID-19 spurs return of the natives to Uttarakhand ghost villages

Lockdown, loss of employment force migrants back

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By Megha Prakash (https://www.dow...org.in/author/megh...-89)
Last Updated: Thursday 26 March 2020

📷 A 'ghost' village, Peeda, in Uttarakhand's Pauri Garhwal district Photo: Megha Prakash

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The Uttarakhand government arranged transport for 564 residents to return to their native, ghost villages across the state, after the Union government called for a nation-wide lockdown on March 25, 2020 to curb the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

The Himalayan state has been grappling with a migration problem for a long time — people leaving their native villages in search of education and employment.

This results sparsely-populated ghost villages in the state's rural, hilly areas. These villages are dotted with locked houses and have poor amenities.

The villages are mostly populated with those who have no option but to stay back, including women and elderly people.

The nation-wide lockdown has resulted in a reverse migration trend, where those who work in the informal and unorganised sectors in urban areas, expect to suffer long-term unemployment and a loss of their livelihoods.

The number of those returning to their villages in Uttarakhand may rise in the coming days, as the state government attempts to help residents reach their native villages.

Nearly 40-50 people returned in Tehri Garhwal district's Kandisaur tehsil, according to Pr_____, a patwari _____ government's revenue _____.

Devalsari — a village l_____ 50 kilometre_____om hill stat___ Mussoorie — is also fi____ ____t.

Migration statu___ _ram panchayats ____ ____entage)

District	les___ ___ears	26 to 35 yea__	___ore than 35 year___age
Uttarkashi	30_	36.56	32.77
Chamoli	26_	43.49	29.79
Rudraprayag	28_		29.2
Tehri Garhwal	29_		29.82
Dehradun	38.4_	34.47	27.12
Pauri Garhwal	29.3_	41.7	
Pithoragarh	28.32	42.58	29.1
Bageshwar	33.92	42.1	23.97
Almora	29.19	42.22	28.59
Champawat	25.23	45.49	29.29
Nainital	29.48	44.57	25.96
Udham Singh Nagar	16.66	43.34	40
Haridwar	13.99	52.79	33.22

Source: Rural Development and Migration Commission Report,
September 2019

"In my village, many left for jobs leaving behind their old parents or locked houses for their extended family or neighbour to take care," said Ganesh Nautiyal, a resident of Devalsari. "The village is bustling with activity once again as many have returned," he added.

Nautiyal himself earlier migrated from Landour, around 45 km away from the village, where he runs a small eatery. He returned to his village after the lockdown.

Vast swathes of land in the ghost villages earlier lay in waste as these areas were unsuitable for cultivation.

There is lack of water and conflict with animals like monkeys and wild pigs makes it difficult to grow crops.

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The young earlier rarely came to these villages, sometimes only for religious rituals.

A total of 6,030 migrants, however, returned to their villages in Pauri Garhwal district, according to District Magistrate Dheeraj Singh Garbyal.

Kot, Ekeshwar, Nainidanda and Rinikhal were the blocks that saw the most number of people coming back, according to him.

A similar trend was seen in Rudraprayag district's Jakholi block.

Nearly 30 per cent of the elected residents from gram sabhas had left villages to work in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and capital Dehradun, according to Pradeep Thapaliyal, the Jakholi pramukh.

Interim report on status of migration in gram panchayats (in percent)

District	Employment		education	infrastructure	...tural	followers that migrate	destruction of agricultural produce by wild animals	other
Uttarkashi	41.77		17.44	2.29	7.14	2.1	4.44	19.17
Chamoli	49.3							
Rudraprayag	52.9	8.64	15.67	4.43	4.27	3.26	5.11	5.72
Tehri Garhwal	53.43	7.84	18.24	3.07	6.17	2.47	4.26	5.52
Dehradun	56.13	6.33	12.5	1.2	2.08	1.4	1.65	18.7
Pauri Garhwal	52.58	11.26	15.78	3.03	5.35	2.53	6.27	3.21
Pithoragarh	42.81	10.13	19.52	4.97	4.66	2.36	4.08	11.48
Bageshwar	41.39	9.09	14.49	4.32	2.18	1.45	3.42	23.65
Almora	47.78	8.61	11.75	3.81	8.37	2.68	10.99	6.02
Champawat	54.9	6.67	10.24	5.46	6.31	4.3	6.65	5.46
Nainital	53.7	7.79	10.37	4.96	4.94	2.1	6.38	9.76
Udham Singh Nagar	65.63	4.27	3.52	0.6	0.38	5.4	2.6	17.6
Haridwar	76.6	1.62	2.73	0.05	0.64	1.69	0.82	15.85

Source: Rural Development and Migration Commission Report,
September 2019

500-600 people employed with the private sector returned to their families in the past few days, he said.

The maximum migration to urban areas would earlier happen from Almora and Pauri Garhwal districts.

The state government had set up a migration commission of Palayan Aayog to deal with the issue of ghost villages in 2017.

Half the population had migrated to cities for employment, while 15.21 per cent had done so for education, according to a Rural Development and Migration Commission report released in September 2019.

As many as 700 villages were listed as ghost villages. Lopsided government policies leading to more development in the plains than in hilly districts were in part responsible for this large-scale migration.
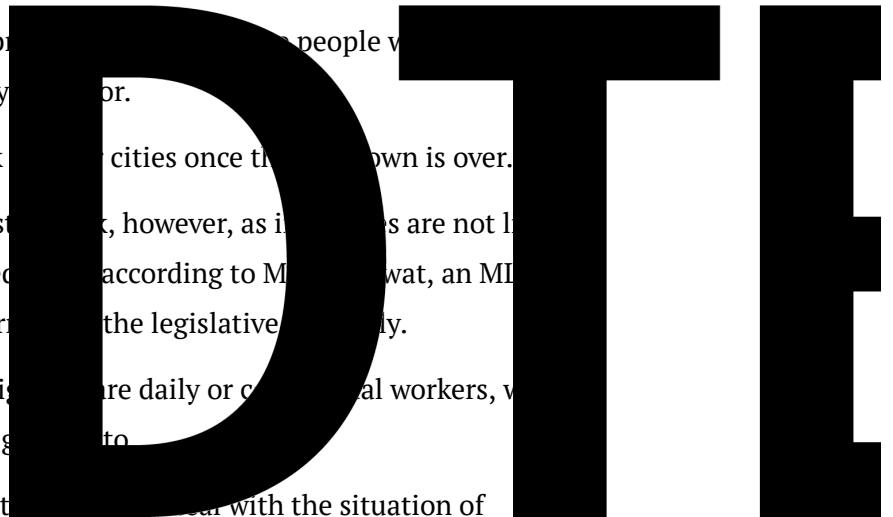
It is now difficult to predict whether the people who come to their villages will stay there for.

People might go back to their cities once the lockdown is over.

Many might have to stay back, however, as industries are not likely to bounce back immediately, according to Manoj Rawat, an MLA who represents Kedarnath in the legislative assembly.

Most of those who migrated were daily or contractual workers, who may not have jobs to go back to.

The state government will have to deal with the situation of unemployment once the lockdown period is over, warned Rawat.

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