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Guidelines

Guidelines for working of Outdoor Patient Departments/ Primary Health Care Centre in wake of COVID-19 outbreak

Objective

To provide guidelines for patients seeking healthcare for various ailments and operationalizing Out Patient Departments (OPDs)/ Primary Health Care Centres (PHCC) during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Rationale

Major hospitals are required to reduce the number of unnecessary visits of patients which can be managed at OPDs and diverting them to Primary Health Care Centres not only to reduce avoidable patient load at hospitals but also to protect these patients from unnecessary risk of getting COVID-19 infection.

Approach

As a general strategy the OPDs of the hospitals have been closed down to minimize disease transmission to other patients and healthcare personnel (HCP). This has negatively affected the access of the patients for services related to illnesses other than COVID-19. These guidelines have been prepared on the premise that such patients should get uninterrupted services during the current pandemic. It envisages that the OPD services for illnesses other than COVID-19 should be shifted to primary health care centres (BHUs/RHCs/Dispensaries/MCH centres/Medical centres and others) to function as an OPD of hospital and as a frontline Triage mechanism at the primary care level. Medical Officers of hospitals will be shifted/rotated to the PHCC.

Utilization of telehealth methods (including but not limited to telephone/ mobile phone or WhatsApp or Internet) for the doctors working at PHCC will further seek specialist advice from hospitals and accordingly will decide whether the patient should be referred to hospital or not. Hospitals will only entertain COVID-19 patients and other patients with serious emergencies.

The shifting of services for non-COVID19 patients to primary care would potentially result in increased patient turn over at these facilities but nearer to the doorsteps of population, resulting in lesser mobility of the public and reduction of influx to major hospitals.



This guidance reflects the need to

1. Ensure provision of services for illnesses other than COVID19 and linking the primary care doctors with the specialists at hospitals through telemedicine (preferably all facilities to be linked through internet)
2. Identify persons with presumptive COVID-19 disease and implement a triage procedure to assign appropriate levels of care through implementation of ‘Fever clinics’
3. Reduce the burden on emergency departments and major hospital OPDs so that they can deal with COVID-19 cases and serious emergencies
4. Put in place precautionary measures for the doctors

Outpatient department

All PHCC (BHUs/RHCs/Dispensaries/MCH centres/Medical centres and others) will work as OPD of hospital. These health facilities should find separate triage area and waiting area for patients to separate the suspected COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients. The patients who are suspected of COVID-19 should be seen by a doctor in separate room and managed as per the COVID19 protocols.

The non-COVID19 patients should be seen by another doctor (if possible) in a separate room. If the doctor managing the non-COVID19 patient requires a specialist opinion, s/he should contact the relevant specialist at the hospital. The tertiary hospitals should make a duty roster for specialists to be available inhouse during OPD timings (connected to respective PHC facilities in their drainage area through internet or other telehealth options) and if circumstances permit relevant specialists should visit the designated PHCC.

If there is no separate triage area/ holding area for patients due to resource constraints, such PHCC should follow below guidance for general OPD.

Serial No	Setting	Activity	Risk	Recommended PPE	Remarks
1.	Triage Area (Fever Clinic)	Triaging patients Provide Surgical/medical mask to patients	Moderate Risk	Surgical/medical mask Gloves	Patients with fever and suggestive symptoms to have surgical/medical mask Availability of sanitizers / hand disinfectants
2.	Screening area/Help desk area Registration counter	Provide information to patients	Moderate Risk	Surgical/medical mask Gloves	Availability of sanitizers / hand disinfectants
4.	Holding area/ waiting area	Nurses/ Paramedics interacting with patients	Moderate Risk	Surgical/medical mask Gloves	Social distancing of 2 meter needs to be maintained while seated



					Handwashing facility with soap
5.	Doctors Chamber	Clinical Management (Doctors & Nurses)	Moderate Risk	Surgical/ medical mask Glove	No aerosol generating procedures should be allowed Handwashing facility with soap
6.	Sanitary staff	Cleaning frequently touched surfaces/ floor/cleaning linen	Moderate Risk	Surgical/ medical mask Gloves	
7.	Visitors accompanying young children and elderlies	Support in navigating various services	Low risk	Surgical/ medical mask	No other visitors should be allowed to accompany patients in OPD settings. The visitors thus allowed should practice hand hygiene

In addition, the triage area should be at the entrance to the facility, away from patient waiting areas

- Clear sign posts should direct the patient to this area
- A surgical/ medical mask should be provided to the patient immediately at the designated area
- Measures should be taken to have hand washing facilities at the facility
- Continuous monitoring of adherence to such practices among staff and facility attendees
- The medical officer at the screening area should obtain a brief history (including contact and travel history) and conduct a brief examination (pulse, respiratory rate, oxygen saturation)
- Any patient who fits in to the definition of COVID-19 suspect should be managed as per the COVID19 protocols

Patients Protection at OPD

- Identify a separate, well-ventilated space that allows waiting patients and visitors to be separated
- Place visual alerts such as signs and posters at entrances and in strategic places providing instruction on hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, and cough etiquette
- Ensure supplies are available such as: tissue papers, hand washing facilities with soap, waste baskets, and alcohol-based hand sanitizer in readily accessible areas
- Ensure surgical/medical facemasks are available at triage for patients with respiratory symptoms
- If facility lacks a waiting area, then designated areas or waiting lines should be created by partitioning or signage.
- To reduce crowding in waiting rooms, consider asking patients waiting to be seen to remain outside (e.g., stay in their vehicles, if applicable) until they are called into the facility for their appointment or set up triage booths to screen patients safely.



Telemedicine/Telehealth

- PHCC will act as the OPD of hospitals while hospital OPDs should remain closed to ease the burden at tertiary level hospitals and avoid spread of infection
- All PHC facilities should be preferably be internet enabled or other forms of telehealth should be provided by the management
- **Telehealth** has emerged as a critical tool in the fight against COVID-19. Health care personnel at PHCC should be connected to specialists at hospital for telemedicine and referral advice, in order:
 - Screen patients who need hospital services through a proper referral system
 - Improve access to specialty expertise for patients and providers without the need for a face-to-face visit to hospital
 - Support triage and remote management of patients

Note: The above recommendations are being regularly reviewed by the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination and will be updated based on the international & national recommendations and best practices.

The Ministry acknowledges the contribution of Dr Saira Kanwal and HSA/ HPSIU/ NIH team to compile these guidelines.

References

1. Outpatient and Ambulatory Care Settings: Responding to Community Transmission of COVID-19 in the United States CDC Guidelines
2. <https://medcialdialogues.in/medicine/guidelines/ministry-of-health-and-family-welfare-novel-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-guidelines-64224>
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/ambulatory-care-settings.html>

For more information, please contact:

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<http://covid.gov.pk/>

<http://nhsrcofficial.gov.pk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NHSRCOfficial>

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