



Unlocking Aesthetics

The aesthetic community makes bold moves amid tough times!

Shriyal Sethumadhavan takes a sneak peek into how dermatologists and plastic surgeons redefine the new approach as they get back to business. Also, read on for recommendations on safety and hygiene protocols for clinics to consider post reopening.

The lockdown was a bolt from blue for most of us. Amid busy schedules and routines, suddenly everything came to a standstill when the lockdown was announced. The initial few weeks were replete with anxiety and uncertainty.

While times have been tough for the aesthetics community, the aesthetic medicine practitioners have emerged strongly, yet innovatively, from the lockdown web. We connected with some experienced dermatologists and surgeons to gauge their experiences and learnings in recent months, and ways in which they have adjusted and adopted to the new normal.

MANAGING CONSULTATIONS DURING LOCKDOWN

Fortunately, on March 25, 2020, the Board of Governors of the Medical Council of India, in partnership with NITI Aayog, issued Telemedicine Practice Guidelines that enabled registered medical practitioners to provide healthcare using telemedicine. These guidelines allowed doctors to offer consultations through video, audio, phone, internet-based platforms (web, chat, apps, etc). (To read more on how

doctors are adapting to this unique model of healthcare delivery, which is not only safe but also convenient for patients and doctors alike, turn to page 19)

During the lockdown, it seemed difficult for us to continue with many of our conventional practices, including conducting consultations, says **Dr Viral Desai, Cosmetic and Plastic Surgeon, and Pioneer, Co-Founder & Medical Director, DHI India, and Medical Director, CPLSS, Desai Hospitals and Sarla Hospital**. "However, from the first day of the lockdown itself, my clinic started getting requests from my past and prospective patients to arrange for phone-based consultations."

To organise consultations, Dr Desai set out alternate days for new patient consultations and follow-up consultations, respectively. "I reserved a block of three hours each day in my calendar for these consultations. Each consultation was offered on a video-call and lasted for about 15-20 minutes. My team even arranged the payment of consultation fees remotely, through various apps! All follow-up information was shared by my team with the patients over email and WhatsApp."

"The main challenge was patients who were already operated and needed follow up," says **Dr Medha Bhawe, Plastic Surgeon with special interest in cosmetic surgery, Laser Cosmesis.** "We called them up proactively to listen to their concerns and anxieties and used video calls to address them when needed. We arranged passes for them when suture removal could not be delayed anymore. The follow-up laser hair removal procedures were done with utmost precautions. But aerosol generating Fr CO₂ procedures were substituted with derma-rollers after counselling."

His being a cosmetic surgery centre, **Dr Parag Telang, Director and Chief Cosmetic Plastic Surgeon, Designer Bodyz,** says, "We had some patients who were just operated and in the initial recovery. So, we had to connect with them over video calls to examine them. We also had to issue special letters for the authorities so that they could travel to the clinic for their dressings and follow-ups. There were no consultations in the initial weeks as everything was at a standstill. From the end of April, we started online consultations for our patients."

"Pandemic was a word I had read in science fiction books and now I was living it. I struggled and rewired myself to live this new reality devoid of my daily interaction with my patients, my team, and friends. Gradually, I got used to the positive aspects specially time with my son and my parents," says **Dr Madhuri Agarwal, Founder and Medical Director, Yavana Aesthetics Clinic.** She adds, "I have an extensive clinic practice of dermatology and aesthetic procedures. The challenge was to figure out a secure process so we can attend to our existing patients. It took some time for me and my team to design a smooth and simple method to provide online consultations to our patients."

"It took some time to adjust to the change," says **Dr Sudhavani Damarla, Consultant Dermatology and Founder, Sri Skin & Cosmetology Centre, Hyderabad.** "I slowly started with tele consultation and then consultations. After preparing myself and the staff and

ensuring that the clinic environment is fully compliant with COVID precaution norms, I started procedures."

"Since we offer some essential services in dermatology, our clinic was never shut even during the strict lockdown," informs **Dr Rinky Kapoor, Dermatologist and Cosmetic Dermatologist, The Esthetic Clinics (Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Hyderabad).** "The patient footfall was low in the months of March, April, and May but we have been keeping busy with online consultation and preparing our facilities for post-lockdown work." The Esthetic Clinics had a tele consultation facility working at the website in the pre-lockdown facility but it was not used in full throttle. But now, there were daily calls to handle and follow-up with patients whose treatment was stuck midway. "We made it a point to contact all our patients, enquire about their health, any consult they needed and explain the option of telemedicine and how they can benefit from it," informs Dr Kapoor. "Only in cases where the treatment could be given looking at pictures of the affected areas of skin sent by patients, and their history as available on call, did we prescribe appropriate treatment." The clinic has been active on WhatsApp groups and the patients with dermatological emergencies were given medical letters from the clinics to help them reach for treatment.

TURNING THE CRISES INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

On a positive note, the lockdown has certainly offered opportunities to better us, unlearn and reinvent ways of doing things. And social media has been leveraged as never before. Here's how!

As Dr Bhawe, puts it, "Indeed it was the time where hygiene was most important. We trained our staff in screening the patients on phone itself and solving their minor difficulties in procuring medicines on phone. We had to design special clothing for staff as PPE were short. We posted them on social media and were highly appreciated. We continued to post on precautions, how to wear mask, how and why to wash hands, how to exercise, eat right and stay healthy at home."

IMPACT ON PURCHASES

At the beginning of the year, plans were laid on purchases of devices and tools. However, the pandemic did impact purchase decision-making.

"Before the lockdown, there were a few medical devices that I was actively considering purchasing," says **Dr Viral Desai, Cosmetic and Plastic Surgeon, and Pioneer, Co-Founder & Medical Director, DH India, and Medical Director, CPLSS, Desai Hospitals and Sarla Hospital.** "I probably will hold on to reaching a buying decision for the next few months." He further adds that supporting the prevailing sentiment, he will certainly refrain from purchasing devices that are made in China and will prefer doing business with companies that have an Indian presence and pay taxes in India.

Dr Medha Bhawe, Plastic Surgeon with special interest in cosmetic surgery, Laser Cosmesis, confirms her purchase of crisalis software. "Mandatory technological upgrades cannot be avoided. We must be patient for the returns." She adds that companies should extend the warranty period and provide good service in view of impending recession.

With a part of the year still left, **Dr Rinky Kapoor,**

Dermatologist and Cosmetic Dermatologist, The Esthetic Clinics (Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Hyderabad), will see how the post-pandemic supply chain restores itself before she makes a purchase decision. And, while **Dr Sudhavani Damarla, Consultant Dermatology and Founder, Sri Skin & Cosmetology Centre, Hyderabad,** did have purchase decisions for aesthetic devices, she is definite about purchasing them after the COVID situation eases up.

Fortunately, for **Dr Madhuri Agarwal, Founder and Medical Director, Yavana Aesthetics Clinic,** all new device purchases were done at the start of the year. She says, "The new normal is about staying healthy. So new device purchases will be guarded and low till we have a positive solution to our current situation." She adds, "We will utilise our existing devices with more versatility and refurbish our treatment protocols to concoct newer combinations. Once we are assured of surmounting our existing obstacles, we will be more at ease in offering all our treatments to every patient walking in our clinic. This can fortify our clinic for future device purchases."

Dr Telang saw this time as an opportunity to train his staff about the pandemic, how the virus spreads and how we can prevent its spread. He too routinely did online activities on social media platforms to educate patients.

Feeling blessed and grateful for her clinic team, Dr Agarwal shares, "As we geared ourselves for the new reality, we ensured all our patients were informed about our online consultation processes. My team and I interacted regularly to deliberate on newer methods of rendering our existing treatments risk-free. We had ideation talks on newer treatments that can be done in the clinic. We discussed and developed videos and other content to educate and share information about skin and hair on all social media platforms." Her concern was that there are people (not only patients) who are on skin and hair medications and battling their share of skin and hair problems due to the unexpected lockdown and unable to reach an expert. Hence, she conducted live social media interactions with multiple brands and public awareness videos to help individuals struggling with dermatology issues.

From her learnings, Dr Damarla shares, "We sent assurances to our clients that we are available to do online consultations. It is a wonderful experience of training the staff and educating the patients, where I had the opportunity of increasing personal interaction and giving more time to patients and motivating the staff." She emphasises that the staff will understand the financial and managerial aspects of the new situation, if explained properly with empathy. Additionally, she too, used social media to inform clients about her video consultations and how to take care of their skin during the lockdown.

On her part, Dr Kapoor increased the frequency of online training for the staff and getting the clinic prepared for walk-in patients in compliance with COVID-19 guidelines issued by the Health Ministry, Government of India. She shares, "We conducted training for our staff on identifying symptoms of the virus and initiating treatment and reporting protocol; dermatological aspects of COVID-19 infection and awareness about the various skin complications that can arise; preventive measures to reduce skin manifestations; skin issues arising in patients infected by the virus, as most of them have symptoms similar to those arising from common virus infections; and several other areas."

Awareness and education are two important weapons that we can harness to deal with the current crises. That said, The Esthetic Clinics has always been active on social media and has kept the communication channel open for all patients by implementing telemedicine for non-emergency cases; implementing phone reminder system for follow-up patients; posting educational videos on YouTube, and Facebook and Instagram; regularly updating blogs about skin care from cosmetology and dermatology point of view, and facilities available with the clinic; contacting patients via personal emails and sharing sales manuals on regular basis; and updating its social media channels to make them more user-friendly ever for those who are not well-versed with use of online channels.



Photo courtesy: Designer Bodyz

Highlighting the opportunities that these tough times offered, Dr Desai lists:

- "Foremost, the situation allowed us to showcase the efficiency of our standard procedures. From holding regular team meetings to lining up consultations to following industry-leading standards of hygiene at the clinic, we did it all working from our homes yet with seamless coordination. This created a favourable impression in the minds of our patients – that we were a professional clinic that knew how to get things done.
- Our patients were delighted to consult from their homes. Hence, my team and I had to unlearn and relearn the use of technology: How to sync our Google calendars, how to organise a virtual patient flow, how to digitally queue up patients and how to share post-call note with the patients. This empowered us to take my practice beyond the physical confines of the clinic.
- Finally, the present pandemic provided me with an opportunity to educate not only my patients but also others around me about the care that they need to maintain to ensure their safety and well-being."

INITIAL RESPONSE TO CLINICS REOPENING

Undoubtedly, the key concerns for clinics as well as patients would be to ensure that they do not contract the virus. To what extent has this impacted patient footfall? And how did the aesthetic medicine practitioners' approach this?

"The initial response after the lifting of the lockdown has been encouraging," says Dr Desai. "We are getting visits and calls from patients who are looking to have their surgery and complete their recuperation before offices

Awareness and education are two important weapons that we can harness to deal with the current crises

reopen and they get back to being busy." He clarifies that the key concern of contracting the virus is put to rest once patients are informed about the strict sanitation protocols that are followed and the state-of-the-art facilities that his clinic operates at.

Speaking from his experience in cosmetic and plastic surgery, Dr Desai believes, "Hair transplants and liposuction would be among the first procedures to take off. These procedures are in demand throughout the year and patients would agree that the results delivered by these procedures are simply life-changing."

Having reopened his clinic in the last week of April, Dr Telang says, "There were initially only patients staying in the vicinity of our clinic as they could travel. The main concerns were that all precautions are being taken at the clinic. We ensured all our staff were well-trained and donned the appropriate attire. We also published these images of our staff as Instagram and Facebook stories to assure our patients that all safety precautions were being taken."

Dr Bhawe reopened her clinic on June 1. Prior to that, she was doing video consultations when possible. The dictum was whatever could wait for two months should wait. Agreeing that the cosmetic patient's obvious concern was cross infection, she adds, "Patients with hair fall and skin aesthetic problems were worried about lack of care on one hand and afraid of coming out of safety of the house. Some were also worried that the doctor will not touch them to examine and will just prescribe medicines and send them off." She approached this by counselling patients about this misconception. "Only hazardous throat or oral examinations that can be avoided are deferred. If required, even these are done with due precautions. Patient's health is always upheld."

Having reopened the clinic two months back, Dr Damarla shares that patients have been highly cooperative, and the trained staff addresses their concerns by counselling them. However, there is a shortage of footfall by around

30-40 per cent as compared to the pre-COVID situation.

Dr Agarwal reopened her clinic for patients in the first week of June after assessing the existing scenario and city trends. "Our patients have welcomed the opening of clinic with enthusiasm," she says. "Our patients were happy to visit the clinic without reservations. They readily accepted our changed safety protocols. While booking the appointments, my team proactively updated patients about the precautions and safety measures implemented by us in the clinic." She believes, "This addressed their key concerns and further strengthened our relationships."

"Our clinic was never closed," highlights Dr Kapoor. She reconstructed rosters in a way that only partial staff would be on duty. This helped preserve staff and minimise the risk of COVID interaction. "Although walk-in patients have started coming in since last month, the footfall has been average.

Patients are also trying to avoid long treatments and since most dermatology treatments require multiple sessions, patients are apprehensive about coming to the clinic again and again," she says, further adding that in some cases, it has been difficult to convince patients to come in to the clinic even with serious problems. From the clinic point of view, she adds, the onus is on us to screen the patients and prioritise the walk-ins. "We have been working long hours to accommodate all patients."

As for starting with treatments, Dr Kapoor shares, "Our major priority has been patients who were already undergoing treatment with us before the sudden lockdown and their treatment had to be stopped midway. However, treatments such as laser hair removal, pigmentation removal, laser treatment for scars, burn scars and injury scars, treatment of hair fall, QR678 hair growth treatment, and birthmark removal have started."

Doctors have been reinventing their approach to maintain a positive cash flow

CASH FLOW MANAGEMENT

Managing cash flows would have certainly not been easy in the current times. However, there has been a silver lining



Photo courtesy: Laser Cosmesis



Photo courtesy: Yavana Aesthetics Clinic

IS TELEMEDICINE THE WAY FORWARD?

It will not be wrong to say that the genre of telehealth has finally come of age in this pandemic. But was it easy for the aesthetics community to reconfigure and realign to the telemedicine format? And is tele consultations going to be the way forward and how?



Dr Viral Desai

Confirming that he used the lockdown to make a successful foray into telemedicine is Dr Viral Desai, Cosmetic and Plastic Surgeon, and Pioneer, Co-Founder & Medical Director, DHI India, and Medical Director, CPLSS, Desai Hospitals and Sarla Hospital. He says, "It was a pleasant and convenient experience. Our patients loved it as well. In my experience, the right device and stable connectivity can provide a telemedicine experience that is no different from an in-person consultation." A traditional-school doctor and given a choice, Dr Desai would prefer interacting with patients in his consultation room. However, he says, "My patients are delighted to be able to meet me on their phones. I will surely be offering telemedicine-based interactions to my patients going forward, largely for the convenience that it offers to that it offers to them, especially those who are based in cities other than Mumbai."

Dr Medha Bhavé, Plastic Surgeon with special interest in cosmetic surgery, Laser Cosmesis, did use telemedicine and found that patients are quite happy to receive solution to their problems that are being exaggerated by the stress. Hair fall, pigmentation, acne, were the common issues for which consultations were sought. She shares, "We also invested in Crisalix, the novel 3-D breast augment simulation software with immediate good response from patients who were happy to be evaluated pre-operatively without coming for consultation. The visit is required for pre-op assessment only after all investigations are done and simulation predicts results with various options." This reduces the time spent for first consultation improving safety for both the doctor and the patient. Dr Bhavé also informs that templates have been prepared for each surgery and treatment to pass onto the patient, and all the reports are checked online.



Dr Medha Bhavé

On his part, Dr Parag Telang, Director and Chief Cosmetic Plastic Surgeon, Designer Bodyz, Centre for Advanced Cosmetic Surgery, cites telemedicine as a good experience to connect with patients and understand their problems. However, he says, "Many of our conditions need an actual examination to be performed. So, I do not think telemedicine can be a substitute for physical consultations. Now, we are using tele-consultations for our



Dr Parag Telang

out-of-town or out of country patients."

For a dermatologist and cosmetologist as well, being a physical part of the treatment process is an essential ingredient. "However, the current scenario mandated that we develop the available digital tools for a faster and efficient healthcare," says

Dr Rinky Kapoor, Dermatologist and Cosmetic Dermatologist, The Esthetic Clinics (Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Hyderabad). While



Dr Rinky Kapoor

she too does not view telemedicine as a substitute for actual consultation, with good history record and patient follow-ups maintained in the past, she has been able to limit physical consultation. "We were already offering a basic consultation on our online platform for patients who were living in far-flung areas and the option has always been available for all patients." She adds, "The three months have seen more than five-fold rise in patients opting for telemedicine." Dr Kapoor will continue with telemedicine as a secondary alternative post lifting of lockdown.

As Dr Madhuri Agarwal, Founder and Medical Director, Yavana Aesthetics Clinic, says, "My clinic team and I



Dr Madhuri Agarwal

worked to establish and start the telemedicine process early in the lockdown phase. Dermatology needs close examination of the skin or hair problem with our magnifying glass or dermascope. Hence, it was strenuous and took some amount of work to reconfigure and realign ourselves to the telemedicine format." She adds, "We outlined an algorithm after rigorous research of the available guidelines for telemedicine. And, now we have a unique protocol for our clinic telemedicine to assess and consult our patients, which enables us to provide customised treatment solutions for our patients in line with our philosophy 'Best in beauty, just for you.'" Post reopening the clinic too, Dr Agarwal continues with the telemedicine approach.

Dr Sudhavani Damarla, Consultant Dermatology and Founder, Sri Skin & Cosmetology Centre, Hyderabad,

believes that telemedicine has created a new mindset for both clients and doctors. Barriers such as time, travel, distance, and hesitation to discuss a skin concern in person, has been banished. "Telemedicine is useful for initial interaction with the patient and giving treatment advice on certain limited conditions like general dermatology." She confirms that she will use telemedicine as a channel to service her clients - majority of them from Bengaluru and Chennai - post the lockdown too.



Dr Sudhavani Damarla

here too, and doctors have been reinventing their approach to maintain a positive cash flow.

As Dr Kapoor says, "Legalising tele dermatology and allowing virtual visits by patients through video channels has helped in revenue generation. We have been religiously following the mantra of 'distance, declutter, and digitalise'." She further adds that contactless payment through multitude of channels has been made available at online channels to facilitate easy payments. Also, EMI facilities have been introduced for treatments that are heavier on the pocket, keeping in mind the current financial strain on people seeking care. This plus, discounted packages on treatments that require multiple sessions have been offered. Other than that, Dr Kapoor shares, "Although we have not completely stopped it, we have deferred the expansion plans and any new equipment purchase, and instead of heavy layoff we have been using our staff in training, patient education and localised patient contact."

To ensure positive cash flow, Dr Damarla has cut unnecessary costs and delayed or rescheduled the loan repayments including the rentals. "Sure 'cutting the

corners' helps," she says.

And, for Dr Agarwal, the responsibility for her personal and team financial well-being is equally important. "In the lockdown," she shares, "I reviewed every clinic overhead and expense with the help of our finance team. We relooked at our treatments and our devices for their viability. We also re-evaluated the roles of our team members and their utilisation in the organisation. Then we designed a new blueprint for short- and long-term offerings to our patients." Her solution to generating a positive cash flow is by ensuring that clinic costs are kept controlled to the minimum.

"As an aesthetic surgery practice, we usually operate on a positive cash flow basis," says Dr Desai. "Nevertheless, we have refined our inventory management practices to a just-in-time procurement system. This ensures that we do not lock up our cash in idle inventory. We also have tie-ups with non-banking finance companies that finance surgeries for patients. This allows us to minimise the risk of bad debts."

Evidently, the aesthetic medicine practitioners are making interesting moves in what is now termed as the new normal.



Photo courtesy: The Esthetic Clinics

RIISING CONCERNS AMONG PATIENTS

The changed lifestyle of gloves, masks, and work from home and household chores has brought about some new types of skin problems. **Dr Rinky Kapoor, Dermatologist and Cosmetic Dermatologist, The Esthetic Clinics (Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Hyderabad),** elaborates:

- Skin lesions, hand eczema, and irritation caused because of excessive use of hand sanitizer and hand washing with chemical soaps has been the most rising concern among the patients.
- The second most common skin problems are caused because of the masks, face shields, and PPEs.
- Hyper hydration effect, friction, breakdown of the epidermal barriers and contact reactions because of sweat, humidity, and heat are some common complaints.
- Allergies, redness, itching, contact dermatitis, inflammation, and acne recurrence cases are on rise because of wearing masks and goggles for a maximum part of the day.
- We have also seen a rise in the number of patients complaining about dermatitis with the use of cleaning liquids at home.
- Few patients wipe their face with sanitizer, which results in aggravation of skin conditions.
- We have been consulting patients with basic dermatologic knowledge such as moisturising the hands after washing every time, using a good face cream before wearing the masks and applying Vaseline on the around the nose and behind the ears to avoid the friction caused by masks.