Going online: a qualitative study of the impact of web-based arts interventions in primary care during COVID Lockdown

Background
Arts-On-Prescription (AOP) programmes are growing in popularity in European primary care. To meet social distancing rules of the COVID-19 pandemic, AOP workshops were moved onto online video conferencing platformism. It is unknown whether the format (in-person versus online) affects how patients perceive these programmes and their overall success.

Aim
To investigate the impact of arts programmes on the health and wellbeing of primary care patients and whether the online format affects the accessibility or intended benefit of such programmes.

Method
We conducted a qualitative study at a single primary care centre in Brighton, UK, where numerous AOP programmes are offered. We conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with nine participants. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions underwent thematic analysis by two independent researchers, first independently, then collaboratively.

Results
The online format provided ‘a form of meeting people in a safe environment’ for those shielding from COVID-19. Some participants preferred the online format to face-to-face workshops, particularly those with physical disabilities or social anxiety. Teething issues with the technology at the start were reported by some. Participants greatly value the service, reporting numerous benefits to social, physical, and mental wellbeing (particularly in addressing anxiety symptoms). Workshops such as singing and dancing helped the management of chronic physical symptoms.

Conclusion
Participants valued the workshops as a space for peer support and patient empowerment. These findings must be viewed in the context of social isolation arising from lockdown. Online delivery offers potential for widening access to arts interventions. Further research should explore the opinions of vulnerable groups.

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