


# An Innovative Telemedicine Initiative From Sri Lanka: The Value of Volunteerism in a Resource-Constrained Scenario During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Indika Karunathilake, FRCP<sup>1</sup> , Sajith Edirisinghe, PhD<sup>2</sup>,  
Manuj Weerasinghe, MD<sup>1</sup>, B. J. C. Perera, MD<sup>3</sup>,  
Anver Hamdani, MD<sup>4</sup>, Rasnayaka Mudiyanse, MD<sup>5</sup>,  
Sanka Randenikumara, MCGP<sup>3</sup> , Dulmini de Silva, MBBS<sup>2</sup> ,  
Dulanja Senanayake<sup>1</sup>, Sarath Gamini De Silva, MD<sup>3</sup>,  
Kalyani Guruge, MD<sup>3</sup>, M. K. Rangunathan, MD<sup>3</sup> ,  
Athula Sumathipala, MD<sup>3</sup>, and Palitha Abeykoon, FCGP<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

The unprecedented rise in COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka since July 2021 led to a situation where the health system was getting overwhelmed. The priority shifted toward triaging patients and identifying those who need immediate medical intervention and managing the rest in home settings. An integrated patient management system where patients could access a medical professional through a short messages service (SMS) and calling system was established. This service provided telephone triage, patient advice, and coordinated with the national ambulance system to evacuate ill patients. This integrated helpline system had a major impact on the management of the recent surge of COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka by patients needing urgent care were directed for hospitalization and the rest managed at home with support, reassurance, and guidance. The numbers of oxygen-dependent patients and deaths declined rapidly and the number of available beds increased. The system played a major role in bringing the crisis under control. Despite many challenges, this innovative integrated system is a unique example of medical volunteerism. The pandemic catalyzed the utilization of information and communication technologies effectively by providing healthcare with a reduction of the burden on healthcare institutions and professionals.

## Keywords

frugal innovations, global pandemic, health management, medical education, medical informatics, telehealth

## What We Already Know

- COVID-19 pandemic is the most serious public health challenge of recent times.
- Telemedicine systems have been employed worldwide to support healthcare systems overwhelmed by the pandemic.

## What This Article Adds

- The pandemic may be considered as a wake-up call to utilize information and communication technologies effectively in providing healthcare.
- Volunteerism can be utilized as an approach to harness support from previously underutilized sectors to face COVID-19 pandemic in resource-constrained settings.

## Introduction

Sri Lanka is a South Asian lower-middle income country, and its COVID-19 response is characterized by a strong focus on prevention. Initially, patients who tested positive

<sup>1</sup>Asia Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health and Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

<sup>3</sup>Sri Lanka Medical Association, Colombo, Sri Lanka

<sup>4</sup>Ministry of Health, Colombo, Sri Lanka

<sup>5</sup>Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

### Corresponding Author:

Indika Karunathilake, Department of Medical Education, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Kynsey Road, Colombo, 0800, Sri Lanka.  
Email: indika@medarc.cmb.ac.lk