Family-centered information dissemination: A multidisciplinary virtual COVID-19 'Town Hall'

Running title: COVID family town hall

Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery

Commentary

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Abbreviations: Coronavirus disease 2019 (SARS-CoV-2) [COVID-19]

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Abstract:

Significant misinformation about COVID-19 has been spread on the internet. Parents of children with complex aerodigestive problems have a hard time understanding the information they encounter on the internet and the news media and interpreting how it relates to their child’s complex needs. Our multi-disciplinary team, at the suggestion of a parent, hosted two virtual ‘Town Halls’ in which families could ask questions directly of pediatric otolaryngology, pediatric pulmonology and case management in order to efficiently obtain factual evidence-based up-to-date advice. The information discussed at the ‘Town Halls’ was then annotated and disseminated via active, parent-run aerodigestive social media forums. The information disseminated via the ‘Town Halls’ reached 4787 Facebook participants.
Introduction:

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has significantly changed our day-to-day interactions for the foreseeable future.\(^1\) Families with children requiring complex care may no longer be offered traditional, in-person, clinical visits to discuss routine aspects of care. Therefore, the comfort of seeing a trusted provider is limited in these unprecedented times. Parenting during the pandemic era is already fraught with challenges, and this lack of in-person reassurance can facilitate unease.\(^2\)

To add to patient and family angst, much misinformation about COVID-19 is being disseminated on the internet.\(^3\) The spread of misinformation via social media, previously trusted news outlets, and through word-of-mouth only serves to increase parental anxiety and uncertainty.\(^4\) It is the duty of healthcare providers trained to understand evidence-based medicine to dissect and disseminate factual information to parents and families yearning for accurate health information.\(^5,6\) News outlets such as CNN have been hosting ‘Town Halls’ in which experts convene to answer and discuss viewers concerns. As many viewers have likeminded questions, this has been an efficient means of information dissemination in a time when our understanding of the pandemic is rapidly evolving.

Here, we describe an aerodigestive-specific, family-centered COVID-19 ‘Town Hall’, in which families with aerodigestive concerns were invited to participate in a Zoom videoteleconference (Zoom Video Communications, Inc, San Jose, California) to share their questions and concerns regarding their own children’s healthcare needs. The ‘Town Hall’ included representatives from pediatric otolaryngology, pediatric pulmonology and case management at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary and Massachusetts General Hospital.
COVID-19 ‘Town Hall’ – conceptualization:

An aerodigestive patient parent (co-author SR) noted the Facebook pages of children requiring specialized aerodigestive and airway care have become more active than ever before due to the concerns associated with Covid-19. After hearing many of the same questions being asked by parents with children in similar conditions, it started to make some sense to conduct a large-scale information dissemination session to quell the spread of misinformation. Social media groups have already facilitated the self-organization of like-minded families and these pre-existing groups seemed the most efficient way to disseminate the invitation to participate in the ‘Town Hall’.

COVID-19 ‘Town Hall’ – content and structure:

Three Covid-19 “Town Halls” have been held. Parents had an opportunity to send in questions prior to the town hall via electronic communication with our team including posting on the social medial pages in which the invitation was disseminated. The ‘Town Halls’ addressed a spectrum of concerns in a rapid-fire format as they were being asked by participants, with responses provided by the provider with most direct knowledge. The pediatric otolaryngologist addressed the local COVID-19 situation including case numbers, hospitalizations, children requiring intensive care, and mortality figures; provided a brief review of pertinent peer-reviewed research articles of COVID-19; and discussed relevant changes in hospital infrastructure (e.g., the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) is now being used to treat adult COVID-19 patients). The pediatric pulmonologist also reviewed the literature and responded to questions regarding the appropriate use of nebulizers and inhalers including how this information is different for children with existing tracheotomy so as to not facilitate aerosolization of the
disease. Pediatric Inflammatory Multi-system Syndrome (PIMS) and how it relates to children with COVID was discussed in the third ‘Town Hall’

The case manager responded to questions regarding the personal protective equipment (PPE) of home healthcare nurses, the thorough pre-screening by health care agencies that each nurse is required to undergo prior to entering the home of a vulnerable child, and the supervision of these agencies by the state Department of Public Health. The case manager also addressed strategies regarding how to plan for obtaining trach supplies and prescriptions during the extended Covid-19 social distancing period.

Many questions addressed more general everyday living concerns among parents such as: ‘should I play outside with my child?’; “is take-out too risky?”, and ‘should I let my child see their grandparents?’ Finally, many family member participants shared personal experiences and their own solutions to common challenges.

COVID-19 ‘Town Hall’ – dissemination and reach:

This Zoom invitation was disseminated via social media, but primarily through existing aerodigestive-specific Facebook (Facebook, Inc, Menlo Park, CA) groups. Each town hall lasted roughly 1 hour and between 40-60 active viewers were logged on at any given time. The first COVID town hall, was held April 1st, 2020 and a follow-up town hall was held on April 13th, and the third was held on May 20th, 2020. A summary of the town hall discussion was compiled and posted on the respective Facebook pages. The first town hall reached 3211 people (596 engaged with the content); the second reached 817 viewers (154 engagements); and the third reached 759 (157 engagements). Reach was defined using pre-set Facebook criteria (unique users who saw the content of the post). Engagement was defined using pre-set Facebook criteria (individual users who liked, commented, or shared the post).
Discussion:

To the best of the authors knowledge, this is the first multi-disciplinary COVID-19 specific “Town Hall” in which COVID-19 information was disseminated to a caregivers of a vulnerable patient population while simultaneously allowing participants to address their specific questions and concerns ranging from access to care, testing status, and interpretations of current medical news and data as they related to caring for complex children. Although this particular forum was dedicated to pediatric patients with aerodigestive concerns, this is a concept that can be replicated in other otolaryngologic disciplines.
References:


