

# Changing Doctor-patient Relationship in China under the Covid-19 Pandemic

Binhe Zhu\*

Author Affiliation Communication, Culture & Technology, Georgetown University, Washington DC 20057  
United State

\*Corresponding author. email: bz179@georgetown.edu

**Keywords:** Health communication, Doctor-patient relationship, Autistic.

**Abstract:** Influenced by the pandemic, many hospitals have adopted closed management measures. Doctors and patients can no longer communicate face to face. The pandemic impact shows that the doctor-patient relationship has changed a lot. Many offline meetings become online. In addition, one needs to make an appointment in advance and obtain a nucleic acid test report to see a doctor. Complications of communicating with doctors have a significant impact on the rehabilitation of children with autism. Meeting through social media, patients' anxiety, and their families pose an unprecedented challenge to the doctor-patient relationship. This research explored the exchange after the closed management of the doctor-patient relationship in China. This paper mainly conducted in-depth interviews with the principals of a rehabilitation treatment center, therapists, parents of autistic patients, and department heads of voluntary service departments in Harbin Children's Hospital to study the following issues. The results showed physical treatment was negatively affected, while social media played an important role.

## 1. Introduction

With the advent of the pandemic, the process before a patient sees a doctor has become complicated. There are fewer face-to-face interactions between doctors and patients, which significantly impacts the patient's recovery. For children with autism, reduced access to doctors after the pandemic has had a significant impact. Autism is a disorder that is difficult to prevent through genetic screening during pregnancy because its cause is unknown. In addition, because the early clinical manifestations of autism are not obvious, many children with the disease cannot receive timely treatment. Most of them have problems in verbal communication and cognition, and thus require extensive training and treatment in hospitals. However, with the advent of the pandemic, many hospitals have adopted closed-loop management policies. The high cost of closed-loop management leads to the choice of many day-school children's parents of unsystematic training out of hospital. As communication between doctors and parents has been emerging as a vital factor, this paper investigates the dynamic doctor-patient relationship during Covid-19 pandemic.

Unlike other disorders, autism requires constant stimulation from therapists and parents in the treatment process and in the daily life for a good therapeutic effect. Therefore, the communication between the doctor and the patient's parents plays a critical role. However, with the advent of the pandemic, many hospitals have adopted closed-loop management policies. The high cost of closed-loop management leads many day-school children to opt out of hospital for unsystematic training. Children's treatment should no longer be delayed just because of the lack of appropriate hospitalization.

To ensure children patients do not miss the best time for treatment, many hospitals offer free online language courses for parents. Through the guidance of relevant courses, parents can complete their children's language training at home. In video lectures, the hospital staff is trained to get closer to patients' parents. Many coaches use social media to communicate with parents anytime and anywhere. Once found, problems will be solved as soon as possible. In addition, parents are emotionally unstable in the pandemic, which can be eased by doctors via social media. Through extensive social media communication, parents and doctors become more familiar than before. Parents are also more

compliant and dependent on doctors. As the doctor-patient relationship is better than before the pandemic, communication between doctors and parents has become more critical. Timely answers from the doctor can essentially control the course of the child's treatment. At the same time, the therapist can formulate the next training plan based on parents' feedback. Parents will also have a better understanding of the whole treatment process during the training, and thus their compliance with the therapist will be improved. This study aims to explore the changes in the doctor-patient relationship in autistic patients after closed management.

## 2. Literature Review

Autism is not a long-standing disease in China. In the early days, many people even had serious misconceptions about autism [1]. However, as the media reports, the pressure on people with autism shifts to their parents. Parents play a vital role in the treatment of autism. Therefore, communication between doctors and parents is crucial to the treatment of autistic patients [2]. As a special relationship, the doctor-patient relationship has always been a hot topic in health communication research. As the clinical manifestations of autism are not obvious, the interaction between doctors, patients, and patients' family members is critical [3]. Parents are poorly informed about the symptoms of autism. The doctor needs to explain the child's condition in depth with simple examples, so that parents can be aware of the stages of illness and actively cooperate with future treatment.

In many cases, treatment is delayed due to poor parental compatibility. Competent professional health care workers and clear communication contribute to smooth supervised treatment [4]. Female doctors tend to take a more patient approach, letting parents realize the importance of compliance, so as to make their communication with patients' parents more effective. Therefore, patients' parents are normally very cooperative with the treatment [5]. However, the pandemic has brought fundamental changes to transmission, among which one of the most prominent one is the change in doctor-patient communication. Under the impact of the pandemic, many hospitals have adopted closed management. In such cases, many individuals with autism choose not to be hospitalized for systematic treatment because of the high cost of long-term treatment. Patients and their parents have anxiety because communication is no longer face-to-face [5].

Trust between doctors and patients is also worth more attention. [6]. Doctors need to be more patient, spend time on listening to patients, and express their friendliness while explaining to patients [5]. However, not all patients are willing to spend time on listening to their doctors and communicate effectively. Due to the length of treatment and the lack of effective treatments, parents of people with autism are likely to distrust doctors. In these cases, doctors need to use eye contact and tone of voice to get closer to the parents of the autistic person [6], so as to meet the needs of parents of autistic children and improve treatment compliance. Additionally, in order to enhance trust between doctors and patients' parents, doctors need to invest more time on online communication.

Due to China's policy, many families have only one child, which makes families value their children more than those with more children. Parents are also much less likely to trust doctors [7]. Besides, some negative media coverage may act as one of the causes that patients remain suspicious of doctors [8]. As a result, the doctor-patient relationship in China is very complicated.

Little attention paid to the doctor-patient relationship in the treatment of children's diseases in China.

This paper fills in the gap and investigate the doctor-patient relationship of autistic children under the pandemic influence. This paper will mainly solve the problems though three aspects: 1. Will the change of treatment mode after the pandemic harm the rehabilitation of autistic children? 2. What remedial measures have been taken for patients and their parents who do no longer receive treatment in hospital? Are these measures effective? 3. What methods by means of social media are adopted in the treatment process, and whether these methods have promoted effective communication?

### **3. Methods**

To address these questions, semi-structured interview was employed. Through the semi-structured interview, researchers can develop a deeper understanding of the new treatment methods of autistic patients in the pandemic situation. Because the admission process varies from person to person, the interview place is set in the relevant departments of Harbin Children's Hospital. The interviewees were mainly parents of patients, department heads, and therapists in related programs, who were playing vital roles in the treatment progress.

Through the semi-structured interview, researchers can have a deeper understanding of the new treatment methods of autism patients in the pandemic situation, and the interview questions can be timely adjusted based on interviewees' attitudes, which will make the interview more realistic, accurate, and practical. The interview questions were listed as follows:

1. During the pandemic, the hospital implemented new policies in a closed-loop manner. How did these policies affect the treatment of patients?
2. Is there any negative impact for autistic people?
3. What treatment methods are adopted for children who isn't suitable for closed-loop management?
4. When is it time to cooperate with other departments to treat children, what kind of communication methods will be adopted?
5. What changes have occurred in cooperation with other departments under the pandemic situation?
6. What role does social media play in therapy?

### **4. Results**

According to the results of the in-depth interview, this paper makes analysis from the following aspects: Changes in the work of doctors and therapists, the impact of new media and other ways in the pandemic, the treatment of children and parents' views on the hospital management process.

#### **4.1 Physical treatment is negatively affected**

Doctors and therapists have been trying to help patients cope with the pandemic, but the lack of access to hospitals has delayed progress. In the beginning, therapist (female, 35 years old) said "We offer lessons tailored to child's condition through online classes. However, because children cannot see teachers in online courses, we cannot play a deterrent role. Children's attention cannot be concentrated, so many interruptions will appear in the treatment process." In addition, according to the situation described by parent (female, 30 years old, with five years old daughter), "even if supervised at home by me or her father, child cannot keep the same state as that in class. The training process can only be integrated into daily life." In response to this situation, therapists also took counsel with parents. Although, very few of the children made much progress in the process of training at home.

Nevertheless, every parent has been able to keep training every day, and the children have maintained their pre-pandemic recovery. In addition, a small number of parents choose to let children be hospitalized. Most children with autism admitted to the hospital start crying a lot in the week before they arrive. Therapists alleviate children's anxiety caused by environmental changes and make them familiar with the environment as soon as possible by taking more company. Therapists also train parents in language training to focus on more than just crying. It also relieves parents' anxiety about their children's maladjustment. To some extent, the behavior of therapists draws the distance with the child and enhances the compliance and trust of the patient's parents.

#### **4.2 Changes in hospital management processes**

In order to control the number of patients who come to the hospital every day, the hospital has adopted the way of making an appointment and receiving nucleic acid tests in advance. For the hospitalized treatment of children with autism, the department also equipped isolation wards for

children and their parents. Children and their parents need to stay in the isolation ward for one week before going to the formal ward for formal training if no special conditions occur. In interviews, parents generally understood the situation. Many parents believe that although this increases the cost of treatment, it essentially ensures the safety of them and their children, so it is acceptable and worthy of recognition for them. In addition, doctors (male, 41 years old, the director of department) said “all of us offer many services to ease the inconvenience caused by closed management, such as allowing parents to order takeaway food in the hospital and deliver it by dedicated volunteers.” In such cooperation, parents and children did not become anxious because they could not leave the hospital. The closed management of the hospital did not bring adverse effects on the condition of the children. The parents' emotion is very stable under the guidance of therapists and doctors. The children's mother said that “I found that the practice of therapists and doctors is very scientific after training my children in daily life. Compared with before the epidemic, I can better coordinate my training with the therapists' plan.” After a long time, children's compliance with the therapist is gradually improved and their attention also gradually becomes focused under the professional training. Parents are also placing more trust in doctors' diagnoses.

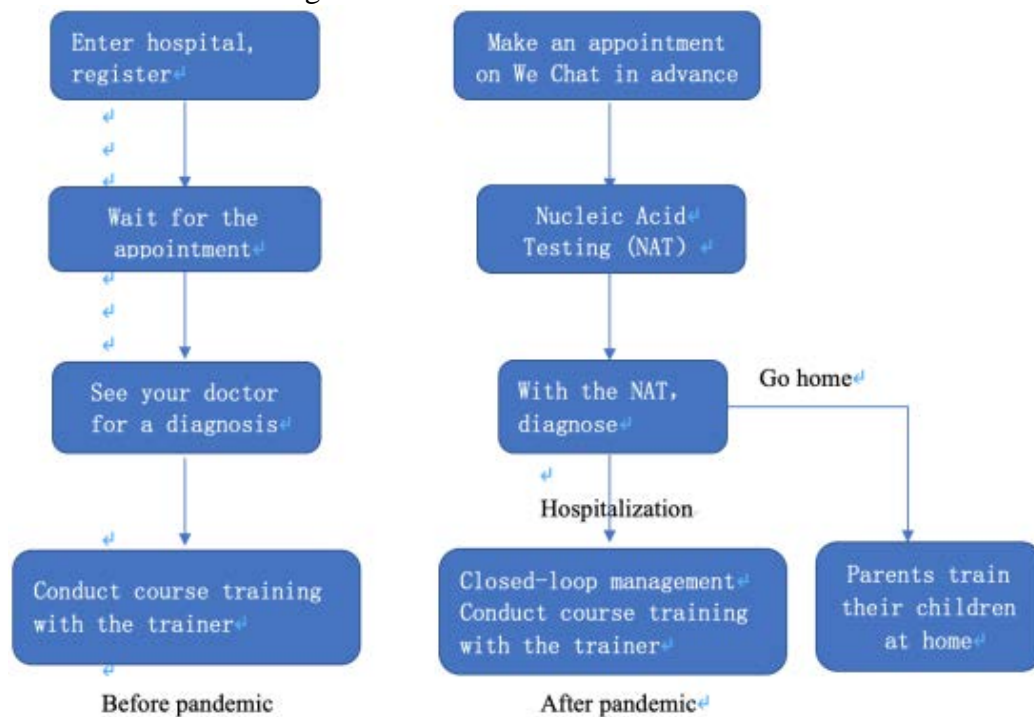


Figure 1. Pre-pandemic and post-pandemic consultation flow chart.

According to the therapist, “most of the children who are not hospitalized have problems with language. Language training can also be practical at home under the supervision of parents. Parents also expressed their understanding of children's not being admitted to the hospital for language training. Because we can always appear when problems occur, the treatment of children is not delayed, so parents are more willing to cooperate with therapists to strengthen the training of children in daily life.”

### 4.3 Building Online Community

In early 2020, the epidemic broke out in China. The authorities encouraged citizens to stay at home to fight against it, so traditional treatment for autistic children has to been suspended. Although children cannot go to train in time, doctors and therapists actively communicate with parents of children through chatting in WeChat groups, and sending tweets by public account regularly, which helps children with rehabilitation training at home to a certain extent.

First, therapists regularly post short videos to WeChat groups to urge children to do routine training at home, and timely answer parents' questions in the group. According to some parents, the

relationship between therapists and them becomes much closer compared with that prior to epidemic. As child's mother said "the therapists can timely reply questions via the WeChat group, I can also send periodic private messages about the situation of my daughter. And therapists will make corresponding adjustments for the next training according to the situation of my daughter. In turn, I am more cooperative with the therapist's work."

More communication through WeChat shows that although therapists' work increases, therapists, patients, and patients' parents are closer. According to the heads of the department, therapists have direct contact with children and parents in their daily lives, although due to the impact of the pandemic, they do not see each other often. Through WeChat group discussions and one-on-one communication on WeChat, more parents have been able to help their children to complete daily tasks of language training for autistic children with the help of trainers. Timely answer for parents' concern eases parents' anxiety to a large extent.

#### **4.4 Roles of New Media**

In March 2020, the department launched its Tiktok account. In the Tiktok account, the therapist plays the role of a child, and the doctor explains what happens in the training process and analyzes different problems in different ways. It helps parents of patients solve problems in a timely manner and facilitates parents to search and watch repeatedly. In addition, according to therapists, in the inception of the account, parents often felt that WeChat group messages and Tiktok short videos were not thorough in addressing children's problems.

Therapist said that "the original intention of Tiktok's video is to provide parents with references for the learning and daily training of autistic children. However, in making the video, I gradually found that many parents of undiagnosed children would pay attention to it. During the video shooting, many parents would leave messages to me in the comment section, hoping to judge whether their children were sick or not.

For that, therapists opened multiple live streams on Tiktok, parents can ask therapists questions and get answers directly during the live broadcast. By this way, parents can not only get solutions to their problems, but also learn from other parents' experience. Livestreaming can help parents find and solve problems in timely and intuitive manner. The department heads also leave a message in the comment section of the video. With positive interactions with therapists, parents can better understand the training methods. Besides, many parents are reluctant to take their children to hospitals because of the pandemic. Autism, however, is a complex condition that is difficult to spot. In order to help parents, discover the condition, the departments regularly publish articles related to autism on the public account of the hospital, describing the symptoms of autism through questions and answers or the significance of training therapy for autism, the significance of early detection, attention and treatment. Through the official account and Tiktok, doctors communicate with parents of children whose conditions have been discovered. It is very complicated for parents to find out the cause of autism by replying in the comments section of parents. It is almost impossible for parents to seek medical diagnosis through a simple description on social media, so timely further examination in hospital is necessary.



Figure 2. The portfolio the therapist created on Tik Tok.

## 5. Discussion

According to the results of the in-depth interview, this paper makes analysis from the following aspects.

### 5.1 Community communication brings doctors and patients closer

With the advent of the pandemic, the communication between medical workers, patients and their families has gradually changed from face-to-face offline communication to online communication on social software. However, with the long treatment cycle of autism, the progress is not apparent. Due to delayed communication, some parents do not understand the condition, leading to the deterioration of the doctor-patient relationship. Community building and maintenance became especial important. Doctors and therapists could spend more time communicating with parents online. By doing so, we have a better understanding of parents' confusion, and also let them clearly understand the treatment methods and the reasons for adopting these treatment methods profoundly and straightforwardly. With understanding, parents will know the significance of daily training, so as to be willing to invest more time on training. In the process of parents' learning, the professional degree of doctors is well demonstrated, thus increasing parental compliance. In the course of daily training, the therapist is no longer suspicious.

The detailed answers of therapists and doctors in the group also greatly facilitated the smooth treatment and increased supervision. When parents ask questions in the group, the therapist answers them and returns. There is usually one-on-one communication during playback. The therapist will also talk to parents about children's daily training while asking about the previous problem. Therefore, it is not just about the treatment. Also, in problem-solving, the effect of daily training is improved in supervision. Under the supervision of therapists, parents will also better cooperate to ensure the training effect of children so that the disease is relieved to a certain extent.

Furthermore, therapists also need to spend time balancing the relationship between the parents of patients in the group. With the long treatment cycle for autism different children may be at different stages of treatment, so some parents might misunderstand the treatment process and become agitated when communicating with each other. Under the situation, doctors and therapists need to listen more

to parents and explain more professional knowledge with patience. Through such positive and effective communication, the trust between parents and patients will be re-established. In solving misunderstandings, the parents of patients will also understand the intention of doctors and therapists in the treatment process, which, in turn, will improve their compliance with doctors and therapists in the future.

## **5.2 Trust is the foundation of the doctor-patient relationship**

Under the influence of the pandemic, trust between doctors and patients has been tested in many cases. With the establishment of WeChat groups, the shooting of Tiktok short videos, and the promotion and live broadcasting of public accounts, the distrust caused by the inability to communicate face to face is gradually disappearing. Social media, though, is unlikely to bring substantial help to children, they still are efficient for children and their parents to some extent. Doctors and therapists sacrifice much of their rest time to answer these questions to guarantee parents in this state of getting reply anytime and anywhere. Although there is no prescribed training period, training at home can be scientifically planned by doctors and explained by therapists. Parents also retained their trust in doctors and therapists as they went through the training and improved compliance during communication.

In this way, doctors and therapists can meet children and their parents daily while still in closed confinement at the hospital. Instead of meeting once a week, parents can see doctors seven times a week and communicate directly with their doctor's one-on-one during routine daily rounds. Professional training can be received daily, and trust has been established between children and trainers. In the course of treatment, the compliance of children has also been greatly improved. As the frequency of effective communication increases, there is no need to do daily training.

In addition, for children newly admitted to hospital after the pandemic, doctors generally recommend hospitalization. In the process of hospitalization, there is professional training for children, as well as for parents, so that parents can treat the children themselves at home. In the process of professional medical treatment, parents can further establish trust by recognizing the professional level of doctors and therapists through continuous learning. When trust is established, the compliance of both children and parents will be significantly improved. Trust is often built in two ways for parents whose children have autism. The first is the professionalism of doctors and therapists. The other one is the emotional empathy from parents established by doctors and therapists. The former should be built up through daily training and instruction. The latter requires therapists and doctors' more patience and personal time in establishing effective communication between parents.

## **5.3 Limitations of new media use**

In the treatment process, the application of social media such as Tiktok and WeChat official account has a broader range of influence. Nevertheless, the effect is not so satisfactory, because the causes of autism are complex and it isn't easy for parents to find children's symptoms in the early stage of the disease. Therefore, it is often difficult for parents to determine whether their children have autism through the explanation of Tiktok or WeChat. What's more, the audience on Tiktok or the official account is from all over the country, it is hard for doctors to make judgement according to parents' description about their children's daily life. Therefore, the communication efficiency on social media platforms is very low. Doctors can only explain daily training to parents who have been trained through relevant short teaching videos. In addition, limited by the pandemic, much of the training has shifted to online teaching. Online teaching is highly demanding for autistic children, which sometimes makes autistic children and their parents become impatient. Children often leave the training room or cry in the middle of class., which not only weaken the training effect significantly but also bring anxiety to parents. On the contrary, short videos of Tiktok introducing training principles and answering training questions live better help children train at home.

In addition, the production of a short video takes a lot of time. However, because the length of short videos is too long, or parents have little time to watch the whole video, some videos reaped low

views and completion rates. During the playing of short videos, therapists and parents could not form effective communication. While during the live broadcast, therapists or doctors can timely answer the questions raised by parents at anytime and anywhere, the efficiency of communication is improved, and it also points out a new direction for the development of short video production. The short videos of the common questions asked by parents in the live broadcast are convenient for parents to review and watch repeatedly in the future, and at the same time improve the frequency of effective communication.

## 6. Conclusion

Because of the pandemic, the closed management proposed by the hospital has affected the treatment progress of the children but greatly improved the compliance of the parents of the children. Doctors and therapists effectively communicated with parents of hospitalized children through WeChat group, Tiktok short videos and live broadcast, and regular publication of articles on official accounts. Doctors and therapists spend much time for effective communication. In many cases, they even sacrifice their breaks on helping parents train children at home. Hospitalized children and their parents have much emotional resonance in teaching and training; thus, a sense of faith is easy to build up among parents and children. Doctors and trainers are more concerned with calming parents' anxiety in daily training and help children and parents adapt to the training routine as soon as possible. The trust between doctors and patients' parents has been deepened in communication. In addition, as a result of the pandemic, parents' expectations about the effectiveness of autism treatment have decreased. Therefore, parents' compliance with doctors' discourse has been dramatically improved. However, there are still some limitations in the research. As this study adopts interview methodology, more quantitative researching results should be provided in the future.

## References

- [1] Lu Tang & Bijie Bie (2016) The stigma of autism in china: an analysis of newspaper portrayals of autism between 2003 and 2012, *Health Communication*, 31: 4, 445-452, DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2014.965381.
- [2] Xue, Yingli. International Conference on Arts, Humanity and Economics, Management. Doctor-Patient Relationship Discourse for Health Communication Based on Documentary Two Hundred Years of Surgery. 2019.
- [3] Nwoga, Hope Ajuba<sup>1</sup>, Miriam Ezeoke, Uche, *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*. Effect of COVID-19 on doctor-patient relationship.
- [4] Pallavi B. Has COVID-19 pandemic changed the doctor-patient relationship forever? *BMJ*. 2020; 367: m2221.
- [5] Jiang, Y., Shi, L., Cao, J. et al. Effectiveness of clinical scenario dramas to teach doctor-patient relationship and communication skills. *BMC Med Educ* 20, 473 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-020-02387-9>.
- [6] Lazcano-Ponce, E., Angeles-Llerenas, A., Rodríguez-Valentín, R. et al. Communication patterns in the doctor-patient relationship: evaluating determinants associated with low paternalism in Mexico. *BMC Med Ethics* 21, 125 (2020).
- [7] Turabian JL, Pérez Franco B. The concept of treatment in family medicine: A contextualized and contextual map of a city hardly seen. *Aten Primaria*. 2010; 42: 253 - 4.
- [8] Sun J, Liu S, Liu Q, et al. Impact of adverse media reporting on public perceptions of the doctor-patient relationship in China: an analysis with propensity score matching method. *BMJ Open* 2018; 8: e022455. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-022455.