Resuming Surgical Outreach During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

There remains a substantial global burden of surgical disease worldwide, a large proportion of which is represented by untreated inguinal hernias. Due to the rapid spread of coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) and travel-related restrictions, global surgical efforts have declined and, consequently, resulted in a higher volume of patients in need of surgical care. There are limited reports of re-initiating global surgical efforts following the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study is to evaluate resuming global surgical outreach after COVID-19.



METHODS

We retrospectively reviewed two surgical mission trips coordinated by Surgical Outreach for the Americas (SOfA), 501(c)(3), following a 2-year hiatus due to COVID-19. The 7-day surgical brigades were to the Dominican Republic (DR) in January 2022 and to El Salvador (ES) in May 2022. We reviewed the number and type of hernia repairs performed compared to prior mission trips, the incidence of COVID-19 transmission among patients and volunteers, and evaluated implementation of safety measures and procedures.

RESULTS

There were two volunteers who tested positive for COVID-19 before the trips and were unable to travel. All patients underwent COVID-19 antigen testing pre-operatively. A total of 85 and 73 procedures were performed during the post-pandemic trips to the DR and ES, respectively. The majority of procedures were inguinal and ventral hernia repairs (85% for DR and 86% for ES), and no immediate perioperative complications were observed except urinary retention (n=2) and postoperative wound hematoma (n=1). The number of procedures performed during post-pandemic trips exceeded prior trips to each respective country (range of DR 63-73 cases and ES 65-69 cases). No volunteers tested positive for COVID-19 during the trip or within the first 2 weeks after returning home.





CONCLUSIONS

Implementation of safety measures and procedures enabled the safe and successful re-initiation of global surgical efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. By reporting our COVID-19-related safety measures and considerations, we hope to provide guidance for the safe resumption of global surgery efforts.