



Pulse Oximeters could help identify Covid pneumonia sooner.

There is a great deal of discussion within the global healthcare industry about the efficacy of pulse oximeters in early detection of pneumonia caused by Covid-19.

In an influential recent New York Times article, Dr Richard Levitan shared his experience at Bellevue Hospital in New York, a global Covid-19 epicentre. Lives could be saved, he writes, if the pneumonia caused by the virus were detected earlier. Pulse oximeters could be a critical part of this.

Dr Levitan observed that many patients at the hospital whose oxygen was below normal and whose chest X-rays showed diffuse pneumonia, did not report breathing problems at all. Because of the lack of symptoms, timely intervention was not occurring.

He writes "We are just beginning to recognize that Covid pneumonia initially causes a form of oxygen deprivation we call 'silent hypoxia — 'silent' because of its insidious, hard-to-detect nature.

"Unlike normal pneumonia, when Covid pneumonia first strikes, patients don't feel short of breath, even as their oxygen levels fall. And by the time they do, they have alarmingly low oxygen levels and moderate-to-severe

pneumonia... normal oxygen saturation for most persons at sea level is 94 to 100 percent; Covid pneumonia patients I saw had oxygen saturations as low as 50 percent."

It was apparent that these patients had had pneumonia for a number of days, but due to its asymptomatic nature, did not seek treatment. By the time they felt bad enough to present at hospital, they were dangerously ill.

Dr Levitan has a simple recommendation to help identify and treat Covid patients earlier: a pulse oximeter that you can purchase at a pharmacy.

A pulse oximeter is a fingertip device that offers a reliable method for checking blood oxygen levels, as well as blood pressure and heart rate. By detecting hypoxia early, it can provide an early warning of pneumonia.

The recommendation comes with a caution though. People should seek expert medical advice from their local pharmacist on the use of oximeters to avoid a situation where patients are presenting at emergency departments because they've misread their device.



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