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Expanding Telehealth After COVID-19



PATIENT & PROVIDER
Advocates
for Telehealth



Introduction

“Look for the silver lining.”

As these familiar words of encouragement remind people, something positive can be found in even the most challenging of crises. For the COVID-19 pandemic, one positive factor is surely the increased access to telehealth.

Telehealth, which enables health care professionals to provide patient-centered care over telecom connections, is not a new concept. In fact, some health care providers and advocates have argued for more widespread use of telehealth for years. Until COVID-19 struck in early 2020, though, telehealth was largely underutilized. Now it has quickly become a mainstay in health care, with one-on-one audio or video consultations used widely.

Telehealth can never replace traditional in-person care, nor is it intended to. But now that so many health care providers and patients

have first-hand experience using telehealth, there is growing interest in making it a permanent option. Patients benefit by having more options and flexibility for maintaining care. Meanwhile, telehealth has the long-term potential to provide a valuable and cost-effective resource for health care providers to reach patients where they are, and to tailor care to their needs.

This paper considers the state of telehealth in America today, its history and the policy issues that will shape its future.

Telehealth: A Concept with a History

Using communications technology to deliver health care goes back almost 150 years to the invention of the telephone.

An 1879 article in the medical journal *The Lancet*, for example, highlighted the use of telephones to reduce the number of physician office visits. And as telephone service spread to communities across America, the first customer in town was often the local pharmacist, followed by the town's physicians. The ability to phone in prescriptions was a pioneering telehealth application.

Telehealth as it's known today is rooted in digital technology that began in the early '90s. That's when browser technology and internet infrastructure first made the World Wide Web easily accessible. Decades later, faster internet speeds and more mobile devices such as smartphones continue to expand opportunities for patients to access personalized care through telehealth.

Telehealth vs. Telemedicine

Telemedicine refers primarily to providing patients with remote clinical care via phones, computers, tablets or other mobile devices.

Telehealth is a broader term. While it includes telemedicine, it also encompasses using these tools for non-clinical services like education for health care providers and enabling patients to use store-and-forward imaging to share visible symptoms with their doctors.



Creating a New Generation of House Calls

Technology has certainly advanced over the years. Yet telehealth preserves many of the attributes that patients and providers have valued in past eras.

These include individualized care, a trusted physician-patient relationship and shared decision-making. In some ways, telemedicine visits are the modern-day equivalent of physician house calls of days gone by:

- **Health care providers make virtual visits to the patient's home**, bringing much of their office technology with them.
- **Providers and patients can see and hear each other** as well as share medical records.
- **Providers can check a patient's vital signs remotely** and do other tests depending on the equipment used.
- **Patients with mobility issues are spared the strain and expense** of getting to the provider's office.
- **Patients with chronic conditions can use the virtual check-up** to stay up-to-date on their treatment regimen.

- **Virtual appointments are also far less likely to be missed by a patient.** And, as a supplement to in-person care, telemedicine can even deepen the relationship between patient and provider.

Some health care providers report that virtual visits provide more uninterrupted conversation time with patients than office visits allow. Others note that seeing a patient's everyday surroundings provides valuable insights for diagnosis and treatment decisions.



Patients are less likely to miss a virtual appointment.



Telehealth for Rural America

Over the years, telehealth has become particularly important for bridging gaps in care.

Rural America, where there are only 30 medical specialists for every 100,000 people as compared to 263 in urban areas, offers a powerful example.¹ Just consider the following three programs, which demonstrate how telehealth can overcome geographical hurdles to deliver patient-centered care.



Virtual ICUs.

Critically ill or injured patients in small hospitals from states like North Carolina and Oklahoma get 24-7 specialist care via telehealth connections to the Virtual Care Center outside St. Louis, operated by the Mercy hospital system.

Specialist physicians and nurses in the center's virtual ICU monitor patients in smaller hospital ICUs and offer guidance to the professionals on site.² "It's almost like being at the bedside," Vinaya Sermadevi, a clinical care specialist at the center, told the Wall Street Journal. "I can't shock a patient (restart the heart with electrical paddles), but I can give the order to the nurses there."³



High-Risk Pregnancies.

Maternal mortality is disproportionately high among women of color and rural women, who endure high-risk pregnancies without regular access to obstetric specialists.⁴

That problem is the focus of an extensive telehealth program run by the University of Arkansas for

Medical Sciences called the High-Risk Pregnancy Program. In a largely rural state where 73 of 75 counties are designated medically underserved, the program uses multi-media telehealth connections to give pregnant women care from obstetric specialists at the university, working closely with local doctors and clinics.⁵



Parkinson's in Paradise.

In beautiful Hawaii, an acute shortage of specialists can require a newly diagnosed Parkinson's patient to wait three or four months for an appointment with a movement disorders specialist. Parkinson's patients on Hawaii's other six inhabited islands often face the trouble and expense of flying to Oahu for doctor visits.

With the encouragement of the Hawaii Parkinson Association, however, movement disorders specialists on Oahu are increasingly using telehealth connections to minimize in-person visits for patients from the outlying islands. Telehealth capabilities can improve the quality of life for patients as they manage this disease in partnership with their care team.⁶

COVID-19's Telehealth Boom

Before COVID-19, telehealth was considered a novel option for the few. The pandemic made it an essential tool for the masses.

A few key measures tell the story.

- **Virtual visits during the last week of March 2020 increased 154%** over the same week in 2019, according to the CDC.⁷
- Medicare reported **an astounding 2,632% increase in telehealth use in March–June 2020** as compared to the same period the year before.⁸
- **Nearly half of all Medicare primary care visits in April 2020 were done remotely**, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.⁹
- And, as estimated by U.S. News & World Report, the nation **was on track to log more than 1 billion virtual doctor visits** by the end of 2020.¹⁰

The surge in telehealth use reflected a major irony of the pandemic. At the same time that COVID-19 fanned people's need for medical help, it also stoked their fear of going to places where that help could be provided. This “fear factor” created a secondary health risk as people delayed or stopped seeking treatment for non-COVID health problems.



Telehealth has been a major driver in relieving anxiety about seeking treatment. Beyond that, however, its increased availability during the pandemic opened the eyes of providers and patients to the value of telehealth in delivering timely, efficient, patient-centered care.

Telehealth's value has become apparent for older Americans, for instance, who may struggle with the logistics of getting to a doctor's appointment. It's proven helpful to patients with compromised immune systems, who want to avoid crowded medical centers or public transit, as well as for working parents, whose packed schedules push them to delay necessary appointments. It's also become an important option for patients whose chronic symptoms may vary unpredictably, making it hard to get to appointments.

The ramp-up in telehealth use, however, would have been impossible without the flexibility shown by federal and state regulators, as well as by many insurers.



Telehealth Beyond the Pandemic

As part of the COVID-19 public health emergency, policymakers temporarily relaxed restrictions on when and how telehealth applications can be used. They also implemented new reimbursement policies for treatments delivered via telehealth, creating parity between medical visits done in-office and via telehealth.¹¹

If these and similar policies continue beyond the pandemic, millions more Americans will have the benefit of telehealth.

The continued availability of telehealth could also inject new efficiency into the health care delivery system while expanding patient care and options. For example, using telehealth to monitor patients at home and make check-in visits simpler has made virtual visits particularly effective in managing chronic diseases and mental health conditions, which account for 90% of America's \$3.5 billion annual health care spending.¹²

Examples include ongoing care for diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease and chronic respiratory illnesses. People with mental illness, migraine disease or neurodegenerative conditions like Alzheimer's may also benefit.

For chronic conditions:

- Telehealth can help patients **maintain continuous care.**
- Virtual check-ins can improve patient **adherence to their medication regimen.**
- Telehealth options can **improve appointment keeping** and encourage positive health outcomes.



Virtual consultations can also help patients avoid the anxiety and expense of unnecessary emergency room visits.

Policy Priorities for 2021 and Beyond



By lifting restrictions on telehealth in response to COVID-19, policymakers gave the health care community a powerful tool that has benefited millions of Americans.

Now, through collaborative and forward-looking policymaking, access to telehealth can be made permanent.

For telehealth to deliver on its full potential, though, public policy must encompass certain basic provisions. Policies should:

- 1. Continue coverage for the broad range of telehealth services** temporarily approved for the COVID-19 emergency. Unnecessarily limiting allowable services will likewise limit the patients who can benefit from telehealth.
- 2. Provide reasonable and fair reimbursement for virtual visits.** For telehealth to remain a financially feasible option for health care providers, health plans need to provide appropriate reimbursement for virtual visits.
- 3. Continue to broadly define telehealth services to include low-tech applications as needed.** That means including audio-only phone consultations for some patients who don't have smartphones or can't use them.
- 4. Support efforts to increase high-speed internet connectivity in underserved communities and rural areas.** Telehealth's availability is only as widespread as the technology that enables it.
- 5. Ease restrictions on sites of care and state licensing.** To achieve optimal care, some patients may need treatment from providers across state lines. Providers, meanwhile, should be able to perform telehealth services even when they are not physically present at a medical facility.

With these measures in place, patients and providers can continue to make optimal use of telehealth moving forward.

Conclusion

Telehealth is not simply a policy issue. It is a powerful means to supplement in-person visits and fill gaps in care, connecting patients and providers regardless of geography or logistical limitations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened patients' and providers' eyes to telehealth's potential. Now, with collaboration and thoughtful policymaking, telehealth can become yet another tool for more patients and providers across the country to tailor care and deliver optimal health outcomes.



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