



GUEST COMMENT

Telehealth to transform health delivery

While telehealth isn't new – remote patient monitoring and sharing radiology images via phone lines has been around since the 1950s – it has been underused. The Covid-19 pandemic changed that, with use of telemedicine skyrocketing. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data showed that for the first quarter of the year, telehealth visits increased 50% over the same period in 2019. And the first week of the second quarter, there was a 154% increase compared with the same period the previous year.

In 2021, telehealth is poised to transform how health care is delivered. In 2020, telehealth was an essential tool to make access to care possible in an unprecedented situation. It was implemented quickly to solve a problem. Now, health care providers and consumers need to take a step back and carefully consider what they want telehealth to do for them and how it can impact health and the business of medicine.

The provider perspective

One lesson learned in 2020 is that telehealth is a valuable, cost-effective way to deliver certain types and levels of care. Going forward, health care organizations need to make telehealth an integral part of their business strategies and include building the infrastructure to support telehealth into their budgets. Partnering with payors offering programs to help defray telehealth costs, like the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' Health Care Innovation Awards, and seeking grant funding can blunt the financial impact of getting telehealth up and running.

They will also need to measure the effectiveness of telehealth, comparing outcomes and other key measures with in-person care to ensure that patients are receiving the best care and that their investments in telehealth are well spent. In addition, payors will require outcome data that will be tied to reimbursements. This means data collection and assessment will become even more important. Providers can use add-on software for electronic health records (EHR) systems to capture the needed data without complicating workflows and pulling employees away from income-producing work.

Of course, not all patients or providers will be equally enthusiastic about telehealth and not all conditions lend themselves to this approach. Providers should review the data gathered from practice



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management and electronic health record reports to learn which patients are embracing telehealth, what services were delivered most often, what gaps in services could be filled by telehealth, and what patient populations could gain more access to care through the use of technology.

The essential role of consumers in shaping the future of health care delivery

Health care consumers have an equally important role to play. Consumers should become more active participants in the conversations about how telehealth can transform the delivery of health care. They should talk with their health care providers to learn what resources they currently offer and tell them what other services they want.

Patients should also let providers know how they would like to access virtual care services, because one approach won't meet the needs of all patients. For example, consider the differing levels of tech savviness between a 30-year-old and an 80-year-old, as well as issues surrounding reliable internet access. This input will help providers tailor their telehealth strategy and offer services that will be valued and used by patients.

In the 1960s, when the government created ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) to allow academic and research organizations to share their work with the Department of Defense, no one would have predicted that what's now called the internet would become a central part of life and business. In the coming years, telehealth will become just as essential and ubiquitous. A new chapter in how we provide and access health care starts now.