Outlook for Telehealth in the Years Ahead

Healthcare organizations wanting to remain on the forefront of virtual care opportunities are well advised to take a fresh look at the future of telehealth with an eye toward formulating a more deliberate, strategic approach, particularly given the persistently higher rate of telehealth usage post-pandemic.

Fortunately, most of the Federal and State agencies that govern the use of virtual healthcare have so far maintained policies supporting telehealth that were put in place during the Covid 19 pandemic. However, many of these policies are up for review going into 2025 and it will be important to keep an eye on evolving regulations that may emerge as a result. Among these include:

•*Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) and Rural Health Center (RHC) site waivers enabling flexibility for Medicare beneficiaries relative to where care is delivered.*	•*Elimination of the need for a follow -up in person visit within six months of an initial telehealth mental health encounter.*	•*Health Savings Account (HSA) Safe Harbor provision which allows high - deductible health plans (HDHPs) to provide virtual and telehealth services for a broad range of health care needs.*	•*Provider Privacy – Medicare ruling to allow telehealth providers to maintain privacy regarding the location from which they initiate patient encounters via telehealth (e.g., their home address) on Medicare claim forms.*	•*More than 40 states have now permanently updated their telehealth laws to make this form of care more accessible, including removal of many rural restrictions and other ways to "level the playing field " for providers to deliver telehealth services.*

Amid the ongoing evolution of federal, state and payor policies, healthcare organizations are forging ahead with their telehealth programs. It appears that the case for telehealth remains strong, governed by several key factors that fuel ongoing interest.

Let us have a look at some leading strategic considerations related to making the ongoing case for telehealth.

Continuing health force shortages and escalating labor costs

Workforce shortages directly point to the opportunity to leverage telehealth as an avenue for making the best use of available resources. Strategic questions include:

What role can telehealth continue to play to help right-size the supply of healthcare workers with associated demand by better and more efficiently distributing the workforce?

What specialties are best suited for virtual care, with an eye toward high staffing storage specialties, like psychiatry, medical oncology, and urology?

How should these programs be staffed? There is something to be said for looking to recruit providers who have had experience adapting to these new care models and technologies to avoid what can be a steep learning curve to get it right for patient(s) and providers.

In what ways does a virtual component complement, versus compete, with existing workflows so it truly folds in as an asset to alleviate some of the pressure on the overall health care system?

How exactly does telehealth play into a healthcare organization's financial/revenue models, particularly in light of value-based contracting and bundled payment arrangements?

The business case for telehealth should pay close attention to escalating labor costs driven largely by the unprecedented healthcare demands during and post-pandemic and where exactly telehealth can fit in best.

Patient Journey Mapping to optimize staffing

Healthcare organizations serious about formulating a holistic telehealth strategy should take steps to map out relevant touch points in the patient care journey. This is the best way to figure out where it makes the most sense to use telehealth versus in-person care. Patient Journey Mapping is best accomplished at the claim level to capture what is occurring in practice today (and how that may deviate from the ideal) to better calculate potential benefit in adding a virtual component - in terms of metrics that matter (quality of care, patient outcomes).

Once those use cases have been identified, the next step is to decide how to staff. Several options have been tried successfully including:

INTERNAL RESOURCES

Advantage being an organization maintains control over training, protocols, and clinical workflow. The downside of course is the aforementioned staffing shortages.

FORMATION OF A TELEHEALTH PLATFORM PROVIDER POOL

Some platforms offer a dedicated pool of providers. The downside with this approach is that the telehealth experience can feel disconnected from traditional care and even perhaps a departure from standard clinical workflows.

LOCAL TENENS STAFFING

Using locum tenens providers to jumpstart a telehealth program allows organizations to quickly expand into new markets or services, then filling in overtime as the program(s) gets established. This approach can be more costly at first, but it does enable the health system to maintain its revenue cycle, dictate clinical workflows, and control the technology and tools.

Technology Challenges and Opportunities

Many healthcare systems allowed clinicians and specialty practices to independently purchase telehealth technology, leading to fragmentation and a patchwork approach. This makes it harder to ultimately establish a common framework for important considerations like data security, platform integration with electronic health records, scheduling, billing, and the capacity to rapidly scale. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort to standardize technology and protocols, ensuring that telehealth services are seamless, secure, and effective across the entire health system.

Challenges

Medical Record integration with telehealth technology can be costly and time consuming. Lack of integration demands doubling documentation, leaving room for errors.

Increased interoperability between telehealth platforms and electronic medical records (EMRs) are essential to ensure synchronized and accessible patient information as well as enhancing care coordination. Ideally, a well mapped out approach will support realtime updates and sharing of patient status. This will go a long way toward helping health care teams make informed decisions, provide cohesive care management, and offer patients increased transparency.

Secure data exchange protocols must also be put in place to achieve HIPAA compliance and to ensure protection of sensitive data. Implementing these protocols will help healthcare organizations mitigate the risk of data breaches and maintain patient trust. Robust encryption methods, regular audits, and comprehensive training programs for staff are integral components of a secure telehealth infrastructure.

Opportunities

The potential for future advancements utilizing emerging technologies is promising. These include:

Integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into telehealth can revolutionize patient care by providing advanced diagnostic tools, personalized treatment plans, and efficient data analysis. AI algorithms can assist in detecting patterns and anomalies in patient data, improving early diagnosis and intervention.

Another exciting development is the creation of **hybrid care models**, which blend traditional in-person visits with virtual consultations. This approach can offer patients greater flexibility, access to a broader range of specialists, and a more comprehensive continuum of care. Hybrid models can also streamline workflows, reduce wait times, and optimize resource allocation.

Additionally, **advanced remote patient monitoring technologies** are emerging, allowing healthcare providers to continuously track patients' vital signs and health metrics from afar. These innovations can lead to better chronic disease management, timely interventions, and enhanced patient engagement.

By incorporating wearable devices, mobile apps, and smart home systems, healthcare organizations can create a seamless and integrated monitoring network that supports proactive care and improves health outcomes.

Patient Engagement and Experience

Telehealth platforms now have the potential to incorporate features that improve patient engagement and satisfaction. Of course, one of the most critical considerations in deploying telehealth is to create the right patient experience – from the initial touch point through care delivery and follow-up. Solving that challenge is fundamental to the future of telehealth.

By prioritizing user-friendly interfaces, seamless navigation, and responsive customer support, telehealth platforms can enhance patient engagement. Interactive features such as virtual health coaches, personalized health education content, and patient portals for easy access to health records can empower patients to take an active role in their healthcare journey.

Incorporating feedback mechanisms, such as patient surveys and real-time support, ensures that patient voices are heard and their needs are addressed promptly. These elements are essential in building a positive patient-provider relationship and fostering trust in telehealth services.

Improving the patient experience also involves ensuring accessibility for all patients, including those with disabilities, language barriers, or limited technological proficiency. Providing clear instructions, multilingual support, and technical assistance can make telehealth more inclusive and equitable.

Ultimately, the success of telehealth will depend on its ability to adapt to the diverse needs of patients and deliver high-quality, compassionate care. By focusing on patient engagement and satisfaction, telehealth can play a pivotal role to transform the healthcare landscape and create a more patient-centered system.

The Well brings decades of experience launching new and improving existing products and services in the healthcare space. Our approach involves the ability to conduct extensive review of existing capabilities and results and the pulling together of insights into how to improve performance. We are well equipped to assist health care organizations and providers in exploring new avenues for telehealth as an adjunct to existing practice and/or pathway to new expanded services via strategy, solution approaches, data analysis and process engineering.