

Telehealth: Ready or Not — ~~Here it Comes...~~ It's Here to Stay

Our world is changing more rapidly than ever before, but certain constants remain imperative in the healthcare arena — human connection and access to education. Healthcare professionals (HCPs) need to be able to connect with their patients to properly assess their conditions. HCPs need access to the latest medical studies — to newly launched drug indications, recently discovered prescription side effects, and the latest in tech advancement — to provide their patients with the most effective and affordable treatment.

While the concept of virtual visits has been around for decades and telemedicine capabilities are not new, 2020 saw a radical jump in telehealth's role in healthcare. HCPs were faced with the challenge of quickly pivoting from in-office patient visits and traditional educational forums to a relatively new and uncharted virtual health ecosystem.

How does a medical practice rapidly shift from in-office visits one day to adjusting to lockdowns and losing the ability to see patients on site the next? Technology, associated costs, government regulations, change in processes, and a broad, overarching learning curve are just a few of the challenges doctors and patients are faced with during COVID-19.

HCPs are finding themselves not only asking a myriad of questions, but also needing to find solutions — and fast. What is telemedicine? Which platform is the right choice for my practice? Will my patients be reimbursed for telehealth visits? Will I be able to ensure we are continuing to meet HIPAA requirements? How can I properly assess my patient without traditional diagnostic tools and the ability to see them in person? How can I continue to educate myself to ensure I am aware of and recommending the most appropriate and effective treatments for my patients?

A Wide Variety of Solutions

Telemedicine Capabilities for HCPs The list of challenges and uncertainties may seem endless, but people have a proven, innate ability to adapt to their ever-changing environment. And telehealth is here to support all of us through this massive shift in the way HCPs and patients interact. Technologies that support telemedicine can range from videocon-

ferencing platforms such as Skype, Zoom, and FaceTime, to mobile apps that allow doctors to send prescriptions directly to the pharmacy. Then there are remote monitoring systems that offer patients the ability to perform simple tasks like checking blood pressure as well as more complex undertakings like being able to take an ultrasound picture.

For decades, HCPs have relied on in-person conventions, educational forums, and one-on-one meetings with sales representatives as the major resources for their ongoing awareness and education. Telehealth platforms can provide HCPs with access to white papers relevant to their specialties, news of recently approved therapies, and updated payer access information. Access to these telehealth programs allows HCPs to continue to make properly informed treatment recommendations for their patients. Through telehealth, doctors can proactively reach out to sales reps to schedule virtual meetings and request both information and samples for their patients.

But, What About the Patient? These telehealth technologies exist to help doctors quickly transform their practices from in person to virtual. But how does this impact the patient? For many, the telehealth visit is just the beginning of the patient journey, and the continued interaction between the doctor and patient is essential to help guide the patient appropriately through their therapy. With the development of mobile- and live-nurse adherence programs, telehealth can provide relevant information and support to those patients who need it. These types of resources can include anything from financial assistance and coupons, to dosage information, prescription side effects, and refill reminder alerts. The technology can be programmed to help support the individual patient's specific healthcare needs.

Is Telehealth Here to Stay?

Within five months of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of HCPs using certain telemedicine platforms grew from 25% to 98%, according to the RxNT, September 2020 Telehealth Report. This spike is mostly due to the inability to meet with patients in person, but also because the tech-



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nologies were available and ready to meet the challenge of the urgent need to connect HCPs with their patients and educational resources. Now, four months later, as practices slowly open their doors and begin to allow in-person visits once again, that percentage of telehealth usage has dropped slightly, but still remains strong at 77%, according to the same RxNT report. While telehealth does not deliver the same experience as an in-person visit, especially when it comes to physical examinations, it does have its distinct advantages. Patients who lack transportation resources will now have more flexibility and options to access their HCPs. Telehealth offers HCPs the ability to save time, and provides them with access to continuing their education on their terms, when and where they want it.

Software developers are working tirelessly to develop further enhancements to existing telehealth tools and invent new solutions to address the evolving challenges that doctors and patients will continue to face while adapting to this new way of life in the healthcare ecosystem.

Although it will never entirely replace the in-office visit or educational forums, telehealth has become a crucial tool that doctors now rely on to increase the efficiency of their practices, provide them with greater access to their patients, and help them find essential information that will help them better treat and connect with their patients. Telehealth is here to stay. **PV**

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