The Modern-Day House Call: Case Studies in Telemedicine

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Introduction

The health information technology evolution in small independent medical practices over the past decade is remarkable. Practices that were just recently using pen and paper to manage patient charts have completely automated their practices by installing an electronic health record (EHR). The trend has been largely fueled by the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act of 2009, with its built-in Meaningful Use incentives and penalties. While it can be argued that the digital movement is overwhelmingly positive for health care, future iterations of EHRs need to include telemedicine functionality to further enhance quality and efficiency and promote patient engagement and satisfaction.

The good news is that the prominence of telemedicine in general, is increasing. The proliferation of broadband Internet, the development of mobile technologies and other modern innovations have helped pave the way for the telemedicine movement. Telemedicine barriers related to licensure have decreased in recent years, and the reimbursement problem, long the most significant barrier in U.S. telemedicine, is fading with the rapid growth of managed care and the emergence of value-based payment models that encompass care coordination and population health management, and make it possible for physicians to receive payment for telemedicine services.

According to the American Telemedicine Association, one quarter of all Americans—73 million patients—are now covered under a managed care health insurance program.

As telemedicine is poised to surge, primary care physicians especially see the opportunities and benefits inherent in providing these services to their patients. Following are three examples that demonstrate how telemedicine functionality within the Hello Health™ EHR and patient portal enhances patient satisfaction and care.
Elizabeth Beautyman, M.D. of Internal Medicine and Hematology in New York, notes two examples of how she and her patients have taken advantage of the telemedicine functionality in the Hello Health platform. When one of her patients planned to temporarily relocate to Japan for a period of a few years, the patient asked if it would be possible to continue consulting with Dr. Beautyman if any health issues arose during her stay. “We did a ‘practice appointment’ before she left to confirm that it was possible for us to visit through the platform,” Dr. Beautyman says. “It worked well, and made her feel more comfortable knowing she would have access to me, her regular physician, from the other side of the world.”

Dr. Beautyman anticipates that the opportunities to employ telemedicine features with her patients will only grow. “We live in a time where they simply expect it,” she says. “You can do everything else online, why not this?” Another patient of the practice lives locally, but has a busy professional life that makes it inconvenient for her to visit Dr. Beautyman’s office during the practice’s working hours. “She wanted to consult with me, without leaving her desk,” Dr. Beautyman says. “By arranging for an online visit, she avoids all the travel time to and from the office, waiting in the lobby, and time conflicts. It’s extremely convenient for the patient.”

PRACTICE PROFILE

Dr. Beautyman

Two-thirds of health IT executives indicate that the use of mobile technology will substantially or dramatically impact the delivery of healthcare in the future.¹

36% reported allowing patients/consumers the ability to access information using a mobile device, up from 32 percent one year ago.²
Joel Fine, M.D. of Snellville, Ga. has seen a steady increase in requests for telemedicine options over the past few years. One patient in particular represents the true benefits remote technology can provide:

A longstanding patient of Dr. Fine’s moved from the area to a community more than an hour away, but did not want to end his relationship with the practice and consult a new physician. “His condition is complicated and he knows and trusts me and our staff,” Dr. Fine says. “When he moved away, it became increasingly difficult for him to consult with me in the office with the frequency he needed.” The patient, diagnosed with narcolepsy, cannot drive to consult Dr. Fine in the office. However, as the medications prescribed for his condition are controlled substances, he is required by law to meet with Dr. Fine monthly to discuss any changes in his health and to review the restrictions of his prescription.

“The use of phone and videoconference visits has been hugely helpful to this patient. I was glad to have the telemedicine option available through the platform,” Dr. Fine says. “He doesn’t have to travel, and I can meet the mandated requirements by reviewing the drug regulations during the visit.”

In a study of health plan members using web-based systems for communication with their physicians, patients using virtual options for communication reduced office visit and laboratory costs by approximately $22 per patient per year.3
Jeff Gladd, M.D. has an integrative medicine practice, based in Fort Wayne, Ind., that treats the “whole patient,” focusing on regular sick visits along with nutritional counseling, bioidentical hormone replacement, and functional digestive examinations. His ability to offer online coordination of care makes it possible to treat not only local patients, but patients from around the country who consult with his office via e-mail, phone and Skype. “There’s a significant percentage of patients who are looking for remote consultations that find it convenient,” Dr. Gladd says. “There are a fair number of patients that I don’t see in person very often, but who communicate by way of e-mail and phone to review labs, reports, etc.”

And while the telemedicine option is convenient for his patients, Dr. Gladd notes that it is an advantageous way for him to practice medicine, as well. “I don’t necessarily have to be in the office for every visit, and it allows me to communicate more frequently with members of my patient panel,” he says.

Frequently conducting remote visits with his patients who do not live in the local area, Dr. Gladd says the Hello Health platform makes it possible for him to easily organize and notate all corresponding documentation in one place. “It’s all built in. It’s incredibly convenient to bill for those visits as I sign off on my chart,” says Dr. Gladd. “Not only is scheduling it and tabbing as a telemedicine visit easy – I can document as I’m going through the visit. It’s the perfect system to be able to practice with telemedicine. My old system was bulky, and it was not HIPPA compliant.”

In his fee-for-service practice, Dr. Gladd’s most frequent telemedicine visits are e-mail appointments for patients using thyroid replacement hormone. “It’s a five-minute visit to review labs and tweak levels. My patients e-mail me, I’ll generate a lab order, they’ll get the labs done, the labs will come in and we set up a call to discuss them.”

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**PRACTICE PROFILE**

**Dr. Gladd**

- Time spent with physician
- Ease of interaction
- Personal aspects of physician interaction.

In a study comparing virtual and face-to-face visits in a primary care setting, decision-making quality was judged as good in both modalities, and physicians made similar clinical judgments independent of the modality of the visit.

Patients ranked virtual visits in the good to excellent range compared to face-to-face visits on most measures, including time spent with the physician, ease of interaction and personal aspects of the interaction.⁴
The timing is ripe for EHR systems that include telemedicine functionality. Techno-savvy patients are demanding electronic access to their physicians. Practitioners seeking ways to streamline practice management and administration welcome telemedicine’s efficiencies. As the health care infrastructure moves toward accountable care methodologies, the use of reliable, secure and efficient technologies to promote patient engagement, align stakeholders along the care continuum, and to facilitate the patient-provider connection will become the rule rather than the exception.

The U.S. health care system has just begun to embrace the benefits of automation, but the added benefits of increased access, usability and efficiency that come with telemedicine functionality and features can play a vital role in further improving quality of and access to care, efficiency and patient satisfaction.

This is borne out through the profiles of users of Hello Health’s telemedicine technology that show how both physicians and their patients benefit when enhanced connectivity is just a click, or videochat, away.

For more information about how Hello Health’s secure, cloud based electronic health record and patient portal can benefit your practice, contact us at 1-877-610-0119 or visit www.hellohealth.com.
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