



TELEHEALTH STRATEGIES

PUTTING THE PATIENT IN THE CENTER TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES

As more and more healthcare organizations turn to telehealth, it's important to remember the patient comes first.



Healthcare organizations have long been aware of telehealth’s benefits, and by 2019, nine in 10 had a program or a pilot in place, a HIMSS report found.¹ The pandemic thrust its adoption/usage into overdrive. According to a study published in the *Journal of the American Informatics Association*, virtual urgent care visits for one large provider grew by 683% and nonurgent visits expanded by 4,345% between March and mid-April 2020 alone.²

But, despite the massive increase in volume, telehealth programs fail to provide all patients with access to care. Technology can be difficult to use, and communications sometimes lack critical security protections. To succeed with telehealth, providers are being challenged to reexamine their strategies to address these concerns, while placing the patient experience front and center. Those who do so are likely to achieve sustainable growth and better health outcomes.

Ensuring Telehealth Access

For millions of Americans, particularly in rural areas, telehealth remains a concern. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) said nearly 25 million people are unable to access broadband internet—a minimum requirement for virtual visits.³

“Some try satellite internet, but it’s slower and there’s a lot of voice and video freezing, interfering with the human element of care,” said James Rose, Senior Manager, Mobile Private Networks for UScellular™.

A secure wireless solution can deliver the speed and quality patients need. It can also improve care delivery for home healthcare providers. “A physical therapist visiting a patient can share data in real time with a nurse at the clinic. Then, the nurse knows exactly what to do when she arrives,” Rose said.

“Local telecoms can help providers envision how care at a distance can be delivered efficiently and effectively.”

– **Rob Havasy**, Managing Director, PCHalliance
Senior Director, HIMSS Thought Advisory Group

To develop a wireless access plan, healthcare providers should seek local expertise. “Local telecoms can help providers envision how care at a distance can be delivered efficiently and effectively,” said Rob Havasy, Managing Director of the Personal Connected Health Alliance and Senior Director of the HIMSS Thought Advisory Group.

Providing a User-Friendly Experience

User experience (UX) is at the center of configuring a positive telehealth connection between patients and their healthcare providers. The technology should provide a seamless, easy-to-use interface for patients and providers alike. For clinicians, that means their telehealth system needs to integrate smoothly with existing systems, including the electronic health record (EHR).

On the patient side, finding the right device can be confusing, especially for elderly patients and people unfamiliar with technology. To flatten the learning curve, some telecom companies are providing their healthcare organization clients with stripped-down tablets for their patients. These streamlined devices contain only healthcare apps, thereby eliminating distractions and encouraging proper use.

“Healthcare providers need to allow patients to use technology they feel comfortable with,” Havasy said.

Providers can offer training for their platforms and furnish patients with a toll-free number to call if they experience any difficulty using their devices.

Working with a telecom company can help healthcare organizations avoid roadblocks as they scale their devices. “Some providers want to deploy more than 10,000 devices. That can be arduous if it’s not carefully planned,” Rose said. A telecom company can test the devices to ensure they work correctly. It can help providers adjust data plans if patients use the devices more than expected, and throttle speeds for those who use them inappropriately.



When telehealth is done right, patients appreciate its convenience and use it more often. In one recent survey, 75% of patients said they were very or completely satisfied with virtual care, and half said they would switch providers to have regular virtual care visits.⁴

Improving Patient Outcomes

Improving patient outcomes is the most important goal for any healthcare organization, and remote patient monitoring devices – a crucial part of telehealth for some patients – can help them achieve it. Using devices that transmit patient health data to clinicians can boost health outcomes and help avoid emergencies and hospitalizations. In a study published by the American Heart Association in its journal *Hypertension*, researchers found that 12 months of home blood pressure telemonitoring and drug management lowered hypertension in patients for two years. Patients using telemonitoring were about half as likely as others to have a heart attack or stroke.⁵

Telehealth can also improve mental health outcomes. “For people dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome, observing them in a home environment can often lead to better treatment,” Havasy said. Virtual visits also enable care for those who don’t want to be seen entering a psychotherapist’s office.

Because virtual care can be scheduled more frequently than in-person visits, it encourages better daily health habits, such as taking medications, exercising, eating healthfully and getting adequate sleep. “For coaching, telehealth excels in a way a traditional visit cannot,” Havasy said. “If you want people to seek care before a condition gets out of control and results in a hospital visit, you need to make it easy for them.”

Lowering Costs While Improving Service

By helping patients avoid hospital visits, an effective telehealth program can lower costs for providers, studies show. An Arizona ambulatory care center using telehealth reduced hospitalizations by nearly 50% and lowered the 30-day readmission rate by 75%, thereby reducing the overall cost of care by over 34%.⁶

But to keep costs down as telehealth expands, providers may need to adjust their business models, Havasy said. Organizations continue to pay top dollar for clinic real estate, even as telehealth has reduced the number of in-person visits.

Changing the care delivery model can save money. One multistate health system moved its telehealth doctors into a separate building, where they work in offices with computers and headsets, avoiding the expense of exam rooms and equipment. Far fewer administrators and support staffers are needed. And, since they no longer need to walk through a clinic to retrieve files or wait for rooms to be sanitized between patients, doctors are more efficient and can treat more patients.

Ensuring Data Security

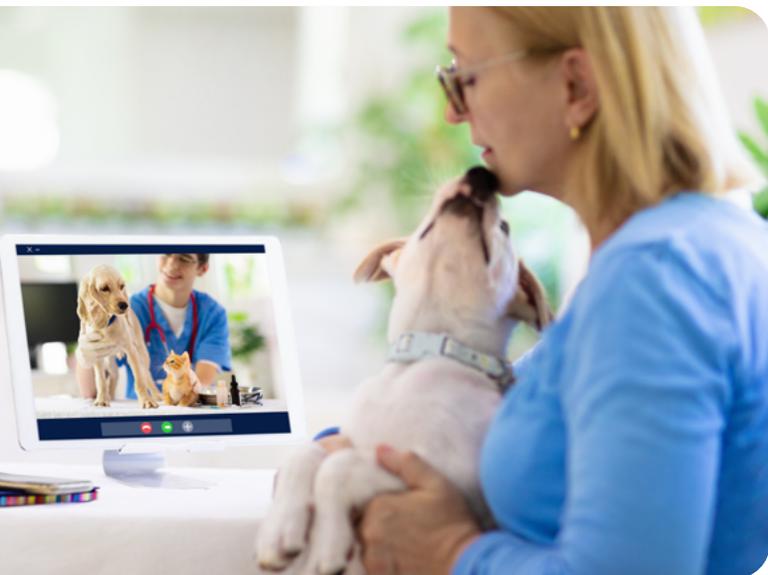
Adding a host of new telehealth connections gives cybercriminals more opportunities to exploit, so providers must be more vigilant than ever. To secure patient data, they should ensure that connections are encrypted for both clinicians and patients, said Lee Kim, Director, Privacy and Security/ Thought Advisory at HIMSS. Wired connections for clinicians are preferred. “But it’s wise to have a wireless backup plan to provide redundancy in case one path fails,” she said.

Kim advises taking a number of steps to help keep data secure:

- IT should coordinate with clinicians working from home to make sure their operating systems and browsers are up-to-date and strong antivirus firewalls are intact.
- Clinicians should periodically change the security key for their routers.
- It's also important that clinicians make sure family members don't interrupt telehealth visits or use the computers on which patient appointments are conducted.

For patient monitoring devices, passwords should be changed from default settings immediately and changed again periodically in accordance with IT guidelines. Patients' cellphones and tablets, like clinicians' devices, should have up-to-date hardware and software and strong firewalls. "It's best to use provider-issued devices with enforced security policies," Kim said. In addition, providers should require multifactor authentication and advise patients not to share their devices with anyone.

Organizations should also discuss security options with their telecom partner. "It's possible to put all traffic on a private network that can only be accessed by the healthcare provider's devices. Then, these devices will not be discoverable by anyone on a public network," Rose said. Some telecom companies also partner with software security vendors to lock down patient information and make sure it is HIPAA-compliant.



Preparing for Advanced Capabilities

As telehealth continues to grow, 5G connectivity is expected to eventually pave the way for a host of new capabilities. At first, its lower latency will improve video quality and enable patients' access to healthcare apps faster.

"Later, in the next three to five years, latency will go to 1 millisecond, which is a speed faster than our minds can process. That will enable robotics," Rose said. New services could include patient monitoring devices used for hospital transportation in an emergency, augmented and virtual reality tools that help clinicians diagnose problems remotely, and even robotic surgery.

Though some of these applications are likely years away, healthcare providers will need to have a strong infrastructure in place to take advantage of them. They should get started by working with their telecom provider to create a sound long-term telehealth strategy.

"Coverage, ease of use and security matter," Rose said. "A telecom company can show healthcare organizations how to deploy and scale technology in the most secure, efficient and effective way, helping them save money and deliver better patient care."

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Choosing a carrier with a reliable network is key, so you can be confident patients are able to receive care without leaving home. UScellular offers an array of solutions powered by a nationwide, fast and reliable network to support telehealth. These solutions not only help support the data security you need, but they also help improve patient care and can reduce avoidable emergency department visits and readmissions.

References

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- ³ **Eighth Broadband Progress Report | Federal Communications Commission (fcc.gov).**
- ⁴ U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health. 2020. In case you haven’t heard. Mental Health Weekly 30(26): 8. June 29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mhw.32429>.
- ⁵ **Telehealth Program Halves Hospital Admissions | LeadingAge.**
- ⁶ ibid

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