



# Providing Quality Patient Care During Uncertain Times

Telemedicine adaption may be a silver lining in the pandemic.

BY KARNA MORROW, CPC, RCC, CCS-P

“Necessity is the Mother of Invention.” We’ve heard this proverb our entire lives, but the past 90 days have clearly demonstrated what it really means. Out of necessity, major companies have retooled production lines to meet demands for medical ventilators. Major production facilities once focused on fragrances and hair gels now produce hand sanitizer. Neighborhood quilters have made hundreds of thousands of homemade face masks to make up the shortage of the N95 masks. Humans are known for adapting to their surroundings and their circumstances.

Think about the changes you’ve seen within the delivery of healthcare. As demand outpaced the supply of qualified physicians, institutions began training mid-level providers to support physicians. The term “hospitalist” became a common phrase in the mid-1990s. Improving access to healthcare in all settings for all patients is a key focus of politics from the county to the federal level. However, there are ways you too can adapt your practice during these times to improve better access to patient care. That access may necessitate leveraging, or at least continuing to remarket, a common household term—video.

## The Transition to Telemedicine

Video conferencing isn’t new, but necessity and public acceptance have expanded its use across multiple arenas. WebEx, GoToMeeting and other virtual business meetings are now commonplace. Sort of the chicken-and-egg principle—did we invent the technology to work from home and address labor shortages, or do we work from home because we

academic center. We have each even chuckled at the irony of being too sick to go to a doctor’s office for care. Telehealth provides the connection between a patient and vital healthcare services through video-conferencing, remote monitoring, electronic consults and wireless communications.

Telemedicine saves time, offers time-efficient solutions, and reduces costs significantly. According to

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have the technology to take that call in our daytime pajamas? During the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, individuals have been physically isolated from friends, co-workers, and family, yet we remain connected. FaceTime, Skype, Marco Polo, WhatsApp, even Facebook Messenger continue to provide the visual connection we need as social creatures.

In our healthcare community, the visual connection isn’t driven by a social need, but driven by the need to ensure that our patients aren’t isolated from the care that they need. A patient in a rural area can benefit from the expert opinion of a regional

the American Telemedicine Association, more than 70% of urgent illness conditions can be taken care of with the help of telemedicine. Telehealth, e-Visit, and Virtual Check-In are three terms even Medicare recognizes. As the process becomes more acceptable and requested, insurance coverage guidelines will adapt in this era focused on quality-based reimbursement and outcome measurements. We’ve already seen how COVID-19 has become a catalyst for driving some of these changes for the time being. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) last

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month agreed to pay for virtual visits at the same rate as in-person visits to address the coronavirus emergency. Even patient visits taking place by telephone will be covered by CMS to help practices stay afloat.

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## Are your patients part of the 70% statistic that would benefit from telemedicine?

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Think about telemedicine from the patient care perspective. Are your patients part of the 70% statistic that would benefit from telemedicine? Today, telemedicine is being used to eliminate any chances of transmitting infectious diseases from a patient to the healthcare professional, or to other patients. Today, telemedicine is about the ability to address the needs of the patients from any place at any given time. Today, COVID-19 may be the catalyst for adopting telemedicine in your practice, but the necessity of providing quality care more efficiently with a broader reach may be the reason telemedicine becomes the next household term.

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### Other Considerations

If the common conditions in your practice are not well-suited for telemedicine, there may still be ways in which you can participate in improving access to patient care. What is the gateway to your practice? Access to the practice starts at the appointment calendar. And a common complaint from patients across any specialty remains something along the lines of “it takes too long to get an appointment,” or “I wait on hold too long to make an appointment.” Let’s remove that complaint all together. Today, we have technology at our fingertips. The electronic healthcare record can do more for your business than just collect patient records and transmit claim forms. Activate a patient portal within your practice. A patient portal provides the patient control of when to request an appointment. At three o’clock in the morning, your patient can reach out and request an appointment. Your staff can respond to that request more effectively and efficiently online.

A patient portal will also reduce phone tag. Think about it. If a patient needs a medication refilled, they

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have two options. Option one might include making a phone call, leaving a message, and then playing phone tag with your staff until the refill is authorized and available at the pharmacy. Option two is logging into the patient portal and sending a secure message to the clinical team. With a few clicks and a couple of quick keyboard strokes, a secure message is returned to the patient’s portal and the patient’s need is addressed. The patient portal reduces the number of phone calls into the front office which allows the staff to provide access (attention) to other patients in your practice.

As you and your staff discuss the changes COVID-19 has brought into your practice, focus on the lessons to be learned to continue providing quality care to your patients, even in less than traditional ways. **PM**

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**Karna Morrow** is an implementation manager for Practice EHR. She has spent nearly three decades in the industry leading electronic health record (EHR) implementations and providing consulting and training for a variety of healthcare organizations. Morrow is a frequent contributor to highly regarded industry publications and national conferences, providing insights on practice management, coding, billing, and other industry-related topics.