Teladoc HEALTH™

Adopting secure, scalable virtual care

Essential measures healthcare organizations can take to mitigate risks

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Adoption of telehealth services skyrocketed and continued to grow in April and May 2020 as individuals began communicating with their doctors from home instead of driving to a healthcare facility. A McKinsey & Company telehealth report from May 2020 showed that U.S. consumer adoption of telehealth services grew from 11% in 2019 to 46% now, using telehealth to replace in-person healthcare visits. At Teladoc Health, virtual care visits doubled in the first quarter of 2020. More than two million virtual medical visits were conducted around the world with our members; 60% of whom used virtual care for the first time.

The 2020 State of Consumer Telehealth Benchmark Survey affirms that telehealth is mainstream and is not going away. Today 92% of hospitals and other providers surveyed offer telehealth services or plan to roll them out by the end of 2021, and the percentage of providers that are expanding their programs reached the highest level measured (74%) over the last four years. The growth isn't only in plans and priorities, but in actual care provided too. Today more than a third of experienced providers are completing at least 5,000 telehealth consultations annually.

Since its inception in 2002, Teladoc Health has advocated for secure, high quality virtual care and the meteoric adoption of these services in recent months has confirmed virtual care as the new "front door" to the healthcare system. But the use of video chat and online conferencing platforms pose risks, including the inability to meet clinical quality and security requirements at scale. With no means to integrate these platforms into health systems' electronic medical records, or to comply with ICD-10 coding guidelines for reimbursement, quality requirements and other documentation systems, care providers and health plans risk experiencing numerous unintended consequences.

Virtual care continues to transform healthcare delivery. As this transformation progresses, it's important for practitioners to implement tools to ensure their healthcare practices provide the best possible patient care. In addition, health plans benefit when members are served by virtual care partners that are trusted, experienced and able to scale on-demand services beyond basic video conferencing capabilities. Consider the following success factors when selecting a virtual care partner.

#1 Find a solution that emphasizes clinical quality and patient outcomes

It's important to recognize and applaud physicians who quickly adopted technologies to help them stay connected with patients during the pandemic. According to the McKinsey & Company telehealth report, physician use of telemedicine has increased 30% from 2018 and 64% of providers are more comfortable using virtual care. Practically overnight, healthcare providers moved to deliver telehealth services using any and all available solutions to accommodate patients.

For these providers, the commitment to high clinical quality standards in virtual care must be among one of the first considerations. **Why does clinical quality matter?** A solution built with clinical quality at its core enables board-certified physicians, mental health professionals and other licensed practitioners to deliver the best patient care efficiently and effectively, ensuring patients receive compassionate care that addresses their unique concerns and gives health plans confidence that their members are receiving care that is equal or better than in-person care, regardless of race, gender, income and education-level.

Telehealth solutions designed for virtual care delivery help to standardize treatment around evidence-based practice and eliminate clinical variations for improved quality outcomes, ensuring each patient visit exists in an environment where providers have real-time access to clinical practice guidelines. Teladoc Health is accredited by URAC, an independent, nonprofit accreditation entity whose mission it is to advance healthcare quality through leadership, accreditation, measurement and innovation. Telehealth organizations that attain URAC's telehealth accreditation through their Telemedicine Accreditation Program (TAP) have proven to an independent third-party body that they have met rigorous provider credentialing, clinical director requirements, and personnel education and training standards. URAC's telehealth accreditation program also affirms robust quality and patient safety safeguards.

Preparing Clinicians to Deliver High-Quality Virtual Care

One way to get optimal results from a virtual care offering is to thoroughly engage with and educate healthcare providers. The Department of Emergency Medicine at Thomas Jefferson University (TJU) Hospital, in partnership with Teladoc Health, created the industry's first Telehealth Leadership Fellowship to educate providers and ensure they have the best tools and systems in place to deliver virtual care to patients[1].

Fellows are immersed in a diverse educational environment to learn the business and medicine of telehealth. Working with management teams across TJU and private sector partners, they develop and lead telehealth use cases while expanding their skills.

Through collaboration with various TJU departments, fellows learn best practices and lessons learned from the program directors of operationalized telehealth programs about the value of integrating modern technologies to more effectively coordinate care.

Virtual physician-patient interactions need to be supported through a variety of possible methods to accommodate member needs. Ideally, these multi-modal physician-patient interactions need to also include integration to ensure PCPs, specialists, labs, pharmacies and more receive patient information quickly and securely. High-quality virtual care leads to earlier diagnosis and treatment of conditions across the spectrum of care, resulting in improved outcomes and less-costly treatments. But this only occurs in virtual care environments where patient safety protections and quality protocols have the same rigorous oversight as care in traditional settings.

Platforms built for telehealth embed years of practice expertise, quality initiatives and protocols into the provider experience to help guide physicians. A sound virtual care solution includes healthcare delivery protocols specific to virtual care and offers ample training to help providers become familiar with the best strategies to deliver safe and effective virtual care.

In 2019 Teladoc Health established the healthcare industry's first virtual care Patient Safety Organization (PSO). Partnering with other leaders in the industry, the PSO supports research needs and goals for virtual care and contracts with independent researchers and clinicians to collect, aggregate, report, and analyze data used to gain valuable insights for quality improvements. In addition, Teladoc Health is collaborating with the University of Southern California (USC) Schaeffer Center for Health Policy & Economics and Northwestern University to lead the first-ever, large-scale study to assess antibiotic prescribing practices in telehealth. The five-year project is funded through a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and as part of the White House's National Action Plan for Combating Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria (CARB). This study is expected to set a new precedent in medical literature by adding specific standards for telehealth and virtual care.

Quality and measurement set the bar for virtual care and expectations patients have when using the service. National data on clinical quality and best practices helps health plans and providers understand that patient care is focused on quality. With a proven virtual care system in place, the ability to measure quality care is a built-in process that allows each provider and each health plan to identify what they're doing right and how to improve with each member interaction. For providers and consumers, the "forced trial" of virtual care created by the pandemic served to help them overcome any lingering quality-of-care skepticism, enabling them to embrace virtual care as a component of the overall care experience.

#2 Adopt a virtual care platform that scales, adjusts to payers' needs and is secure

The National Health Care Anti-Fraud Association (NHCAA) estimates that the financial losses due to health care fraud are, at a minimum, 3% of total health care expenditures and as much as 10% of the annual healthcare spend in the U.S. ($3.4 trillion)[2]. The increased use of communication tools that do not meet standard compliance requirements means healthcare organizations need to use additional resources to manage the escalation of billing

concerns. Reimbursing physicians for pain consults, treating complex conditions and longer appointments have come into question as CMS and insurers struggle to validate such billing situations in the absence of direct visibility into whether or not such patient visits actually occurred on platforms ill-designed for virtual care.

The importance of using a highly secure virtual care solution that also scales for the health plans' diverse population needs has never been more obvious. Billing is just one component of an ever-changing virtual care landscape. A health plan's virtual care partner must exhibit high competence in understanding what services are covered and providing real-time integration of CMS code changes for billing purposes. In addition, ensuring member information is secure from potential hacks and data breaches is paramount.

A purpose-built virtual care solution connects visit requests, on-demand visit and appointment start and completion times, the doctor's acceptance and participation of the appointment, and the documentation and result of each visit. **A fully traceable end-to-end system, noting each member request and properly linking the outcome of the virtual visit protects against fraud.** And, this should all be completed in a seamless, timely manner ensuring complete documentation for accurate reimbursement.

Safeguarding member data is a top priority for health plans and providers. Although the U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) temporarily suspended enforcement of certain HIPAA requirements so that providers could quickly and efficiently engage with patients remotely during the COVID-19 public health emergency, HIPAA requirements are not going away forever. Engaging with a virtual care partner that protects itself with malware defenses and security event monitoring, and offers redundancy at every functional level— database, web application, and storage is essential. Teladoc Health achieved HITRUST CSF certification—the benchmark healthcare organizations require to safeguard their protected health information (PHI) and measure the proficiency for information protection.

The use of virtual healthcare services places more demand on medical data processing, which means the service itself must be secure and protect patient data. The right platforms comply with all HIPAA and Department of Health and Human Services regulations and guidance, in addition to adhering to general cybersecurity best practices. With these measures in place, members can have confidence in the information they share with each virtual care interaction—and health plans will have confidence in the ability for the service to scale and grow as demand grows.

#3 Using virtual care to effectively engage with patients requires unique skills

Physicians know that every patient encounter differs from the last. Not only do patient needs differ but extracting accurate self-reported patient insights can be a difficult task. Some patients freely share details about their health while others need to be asked specific questions before they provide useful information. Many other factors exist when interacting with patients in the exam room, but when a physician launches virtual care to engage with a patient, he or she often enters the patient's home.

Adopting a virtual care solution that provides expertise and education in virtual care patient interactions advances patient confidence in the telehealth experience. When the member experience is positive, satisfaction rates also rises—an important measure health plans and providers can monitor. Integrated real-time patient surveys are invaluable to help physicians gain confidence and become comfortable engaging and communicating with patients virtually. Conducted after each virtual visit, these surveys provide insight for the health plan, for the provider and, if requested, allows feedback to be shared with peer coaches who can then share insight and suggestions for improvement in real time with the provider.

Quality ratings such as Medicare Advantage Star Ratings and HEDIS measures play a significant role in member perception of the health plan, impacting enrollment, retention and financial gains or losses. Ninety percent of U.S. health plans rely on HEDIS measures to compare healthcare performance with other health plans[3]. When virtual care assists in supporting members (as well as physicians) in maintaining health and managing complex conditions through positive interactions, member satisfaction and perception of the health plans improves.

Studies have shown that clinical outcomes are not only dependent upon effective identification and effective treatment of medical issues, but also the clinician's ability to communicate and engage effectively. Examples of successful patient interactions that need to be part of virtual visits include:

· Setting aside adequate time to provide quality care

· Clearly explaining medical conditions and diagnosis

· Completely resolving medical concerns during the visit

· Treating patients with courtesy and respect

· Listening carefully

· Giving easy to understand information on health questions and concerns

· Providing a high-quality medical diagnosis

· Having personality or making the visit personal

We know, without question, that multiple modalities help patients become comfortable and more confident using virtual care services. As patients gain a comfort level with the service, they'll choose the convenient option for their health needs when it makes sense—eliminating the drive to the clinic when it doesn't require an in-person consultation.

Teladoc received the Highest Telehealth Satisfaction with Direct-to-Consumer Providers in the J.D. Power 2019 U.S. Telehealth Satisfaction Study[4]. At Teladoc Health, we are committed to delivering high-quality evidence-based medicine and an exceptional patient experience.

Prepare now for post-COVID healthcare delivery

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, federal and state government sprinted to allow emergency waivers; governors signed executive orders suspending rules and regulations to enable telehealth services. But as the COVID-19 emergency lifts, using consumer communication tools will face heightened scrutiny, and physician waiver and billing requirements will likely revert to pre-COVID standards. Working with a trusted, strategic virtual care partner, health plans can be assured that all state and federal regulations are being met—especially for Medicare and Medicaid—so providers and plan members can continue with uninterrupted virtual care engagement that meets their members' needs.

Virtual care will increasingly become an essential part of modern medicine, leading to demand for services that easily and comfortably integrate with traditional in-office visits. While standard video and universal communication platforms have served a role in helping maintain the physician/patient connection during the pandemic, healthcare organizations need to carefully consider the tools quickly adopted by many providers and determine how to best approach harnessing virtual care to transform healthcare delivery. **Today, there is an opportunity to raise the bar on clinical quality with a comprehensive, scalable and secure platform built to support providers while sustaining change in consumer behavior.**

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[1]Telehealth Leadership Fellowship, Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, https://www.jefferson.edu/university/jmc/departments/emergency_medicine/education/fellowships/telehealth_leadership.html

[2]*"The challenge of healthcare fraud,"* National Healthcare Anti-Fraud Association, https://www.nhcaa.org/resources/health-care-anti-fraud-resources/the-challenge-of-health-care-fraud/

[3]*"Covid-19 and Telehealth Expansion,"* by Jazmyne Carter, National Committee for Quality Assurance, NCQA Blog, March 25, 2020, https://blog.ncqa.org/covid-19-and-telehealth-expansion/

[4]*Telehealth: Best Consumer Healthcare Experience You've Never Tried,* J.D. Power 2019 U.S. Telehealth Satisfaction Study, Oct. 28, 2019, https://www.jdpower.com/business/press-releases/2019-us-telehealth-satisfaction-study

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About Teladoc Health
Teladoc Health is the global virtual care leader, helping millions of people resolve their healthcare needs with confidence. Together with our clients and partners, we are continually modernizing the healthcare experience and making high-quality healthcare a reality for more people and organizations around the world.