HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY ADOPT TELEMEDICINE INTO YOUR PRACTICE

From setting clear goals to finding a platform that best suits your needs, position your practice to succeed in an increasingly competitive, consumer-focused market.

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Patients have experienced the freedom and flexibility that modern technology solutions have given them in every other aspect of their lives – from shopping on Amazon, to calling their families using Skype and FaceTime, accessing social media on their mobile phones, and summoning an Uber driver from anywhere, anytime. They crave that same type of flexibility as they interact with healthcare professionals.

At the same time, physicians and other providers are under increasing pressure to treat a greater number of patients in a more cost-effective way. Specialists, mental healthcare providers, and even primary care physicians are also struggling in many regions of the country to effectively reach widely dispersed patient populations. This is especially true in rural areas, where healthcare needs are increasing while the number of available providers is, in some cases, shrinking.

Telemedicine (or telehealth) technologies can address the needs of both patients and providers by enabling convenient, inexpensive healthcare encounters that improve patient engagement while allowing physicians to serve more patients without increasing costs.

Telemedicine involves the remote diagnoses and treatment of patients using telecommunications technology – most often via a secure, HIPAA-compliant video conference or other means. An ad hoc approach to telemedicine using SMS messaging, Skype, or other consumer technologies can result in low patient adoption, frustration for staff, and potential HIPAA violations. Adopting telemedicine in a healthcare practice requires planning, training, and partnering with a technology provider that can offer the right level of expertise and support to ensure success.

Both healthcare providers and patients are clearly already moving this direction. According to a 2014 survey from Foley & Lardner, 90% of healthcare leaders are already developing telemedicine programs, and there are projected to be at least 7 million telemedicine patient interactions in 2018. In 2016, Kaiser Permanente reported that 52% of its annual patient visits were completed via some form of telemedicine, and 75% of patients in a survey conducted by Software Advice said they were interested in engaging in telemedicine visits.

Further, a study by the University of Missouri School of Medicine found that 80 percent of providers and patients were satisfied with their telemedicine video visit experience.

And patients are engaging in telemedicine even without the participation of their physicians. Consumers with minor health complaints are already going directly to online telemedicine services, insurance-based solutions, and other providers – meaning physicians are potentially losing business to these third-party solutions.

Physician practices do face challenges when it comes to telemedicine, which is why many providers have hesitated to move forward. Different states have different requirements when it comes to reimbursing providers telemedicine visits, and not every insurance plan clearly outlines how to bill for these encounters.

HIPAA requirements for securing electronic protected health information (ePHI) can be confusing for practices, and they may not have the necessary technological infrastructure in place to successfully manage a telemedicine system without assistance.

Despite these challenges, physician practices and other providers can benefit greatly from a telemedicine strategy. While the technology isn't appropriate for every patient, data reported by the Healthcare Performance Management Institute indicates that as many as 40 percent of emergency room visits could be handled using a telemedicine approach. A separate survey found that up to 40 percent of doctors office visits were unnecessary and could have been handled remotely.

Potential benefits include:

- Easier scheduling
- Reduced costs
- Improved patient satisfaction
- Increased revenue
- More convenient patient interactions
- Enablement of subscription/concierge health models
- The ability to see more patients in less time
- Improved quality of care through more patient engagement

This is a roadmap for adopting telemedicine and an overview of the types of benefits possible via remote medicine.

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Telemedicine Requirements and Defining Organizational Goals

Technology shouldn't be deployed for its own sake – it should solve specific problems in a way that can't be otherwise addressed through more effective means. A practice considering a telemedicine strategy should first define why they are considering the technology and what they hope to accomplish.

It is also critical to define clear goals. Identify the issues you want to address, map out how telemedicine (and related strategies or technologies) can help alleviate those pain points, and define how you will measure success against those goals.

Are you losing patients to competitive practices, or to consumer-based or insurance-based telemedicine systems? Do you want to increase incremental revenue? Are you trying to adopt a subscription/concierge practice model, and believe telemedicine could help enable that transition?

While organizational goals will vary based on specialty, size, type and geography, below is a list of common practice goals that can be achieved via telemedicine:

- Increase revenue
- Improve accessibility
- Improve outcomes and care plan compliance
- Reduce hospital readmissions
- Improve patient satisfaction scores
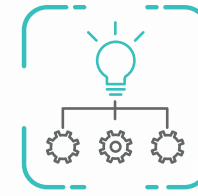- Attract new patients
- Improve patient loyalty

Once your goals are outlined, you will also need to ensure that the practice is able to support a telemedicine solution, and your technology infrastructure will play an important role. The practice will need access to desktops, laptops, and/or mobile phones/tablets that include reliable web cameras. There also needs to be a reliable, high-speed Internet connection available to ensure video calls with patients can be completed without delays, latency, or other problems that will make the experience unpleasant.
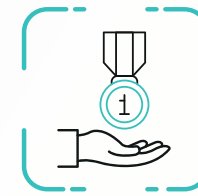
Increase revenue

Improve accessibility

Improve outcomes

Reduce hospital readmissions

Improve patient satisfaction

Attract new patients

Improve patient loyalty

The ability to be reimbursed for telemedicine visits is another key consideration, and this will vary by state and insurance carrier policies. Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have parity laws that cover private insurers and reimbursement for telemedicine services, and other states have introduced similar legislation (Health Affairs, Health Policy Brief, August 2016). State policy also affects whether Medicaid will reimburse for such services. (Medicare provides for reimbursement of synchronous communications for specific types of visits and under certain conditions.)

These state requirements vary. In some cases, reimbursement may not be equal to an in-person visit. Other states may place restrictions on the types of visits covered under parity, or the conditions under which the visit can take place. The practice should investigate state requirements and the individual policies of major insurance carriers to get a better handle on reimbursement and revenue issues prior to deployment.

Finally, the practice should prepare staff for the transition by educating them about telemedicine, the potential benefits, and how the technology may affect their individual roles. Telemedicine could affect scheduling, billing, office hours, staffing, and other areas. Work with the vendor to outline those effects and keep your staff informed to ensure employee buy-in for the new solution.

Telemedicine Benefits

Telemedicine provides both hard benefits (improvements in revenue, efficiency, etc.) and soft benefits (patient satisfaction). How highly an individual practice values those benefits will depend on the goals established prior to deployment. Improvements generally fall into a few broad categories, outlined below.

Recapture and Increase Revenue:

Physicians often take after-hours calls from patients for emergencies, to take care of medication refills, and for follow-ups after procedures. These audio-only encounters are not reimbursable, or at least very difficult to charge for. With two-way video telemedicine, these encounters now become reimbursable events.

No-shows are also a major problem for many practices. Patients may face transportation, child care, and work-related obstacles to being able to make every appointment. As a result, practices often double or triple book to ameliorate the issue. Telemedicine provides a way to see those patients at a time that is convenient for them, and helps make the schedule more manageable.

Additionally, telemedicine can also help attract new patients, retain existing patients (who will enjoy the convenience), and provide a competitive advantage in the more consumer-oriented healthcare services market.

Patients will pay for that convenience. Even in states where telemedicine may not be fully reimbursable, patients are willing to pay out of pocket for telemedicine. According to data from eVisit, providers could collect a self-pay fee that averages between $50 to $100. (Providers can set whatever fee they see fit, depending on their own market and practice specialty.)

Telemedicine can also help providers better prioritize their schedules, which can improve revenue. By relegating standard appointments such as post-operative follow-ups or initial consultations to the telemedicine channel, physicians can dedicate more time to more critical patient issues or to more lucrative revenue generating activities (such as performing more surgeries or procedures). This alleviates the strain on the exam room, so that patients who really do need to see the doctor in person will have an easier time scheduling that appointment.
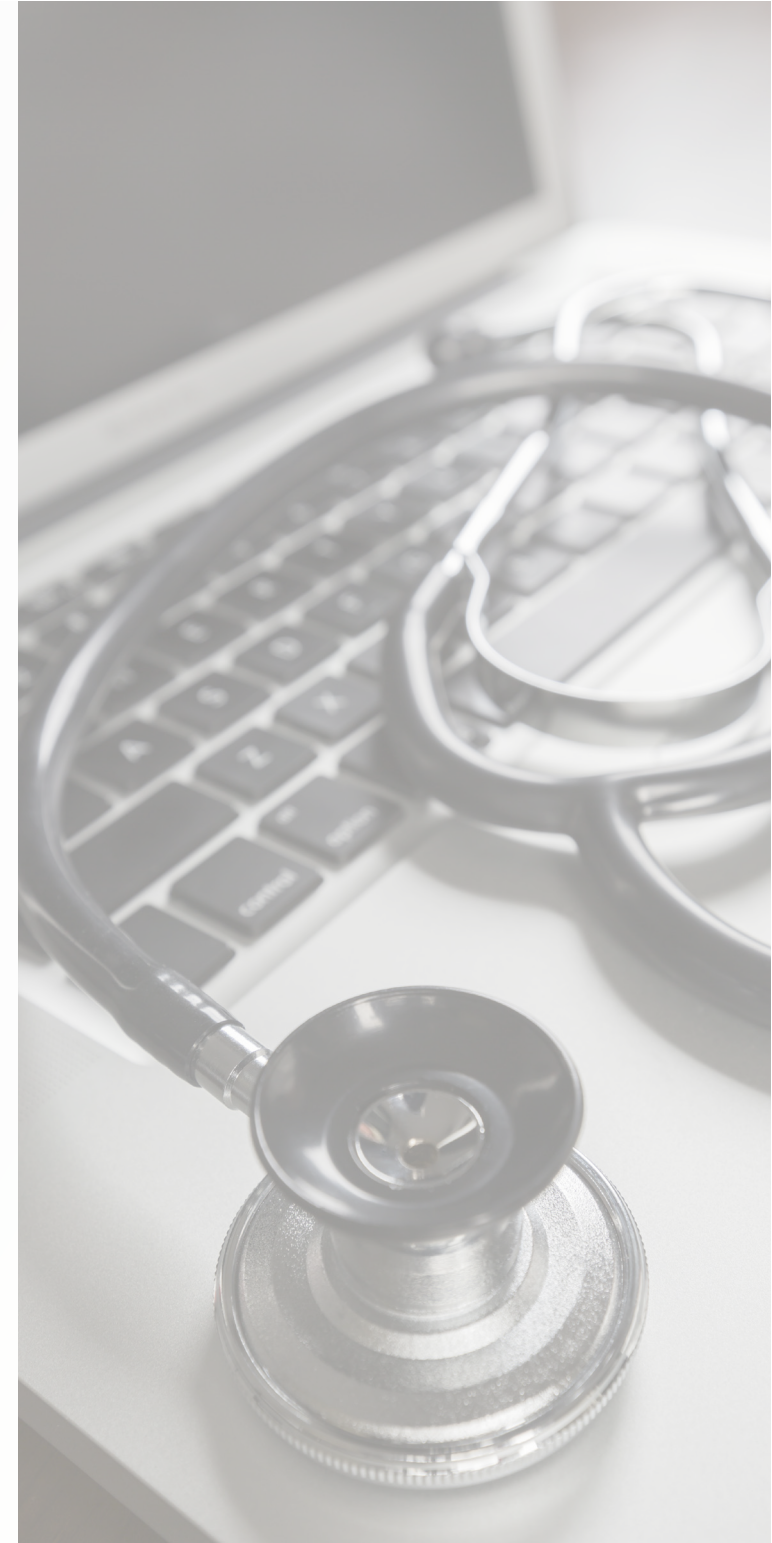
Improved Quality of Care:

Retaining patients is just as important as drawing in new ones. The improved patient engagement enabled by telemedicine can help show patients you understand their needs and are working toward offering them the solutions they want, to provide access to care when and where they need it. Give patients a better user experience, and they are more likely to return (and less likely to leave for a competitor).

Telemedicine can also help improve care plan adherence and make it more likely that patients will follow-up after treatment and stay engaged with the practice. That can, in turn, reduce hospital readmissions. By using telemedicine to enable mandatory follow-up encounters for patients that have been discharged from the hospital, providers can ensure that patients are following their care plan. If there are any complications, they can adjust the plan accordingly – and do so without requiring the recuperating patient to physically come back to the facility. This reduces the overall healthcare costs across the entire system.

Patients can also take comfort in the ability to have a telemedicine visit with a known, trusted provider, and their continuity of care will remain consistent regardless of how they access the system.

Improved Flexibility for the Practice:

Telemedicine allows practices to expand their patient base without hiring more staff or extending operating hours.

A practice could even block out an entire day for telemedicine visits, allowing doctors to shut down the office and reduce costs. If the doctor is traveling or at a conference, they can continue to engage with patients without finding another doctor to cover or overburdening staff. The convenience of telemedicine also extends to physicians and staff, who have to log less time in the office and can achieve a better work/life balance in the process.

Physician practices have the ability to offer after-hours services without increasing their expenses, and telemedicine could even be used to help bring in new patients. For providers that specialize in elective procedures (such as plastic surgery), for example, telemedicine could be leveraged as a marketing tool. The practice could offer initial consultations at no cost to the patient via the technology.

For a provider with the proper licensing, telemedicine could even make it possible to extend the range of a practice into a wider geographic area, or even across state lines. In remote or rural areas, this type of flexibly can be extremely valuable, particularly for specialists or mental health professionals who are in short supply in those regions.

Live telemedicine deployments have shown that practices can improve patient outreach and increase revenue. The case study examples that follow provide a snapshot of the benefits that are possible across a variety of practice areas.

There is no shortage of use cases that bear out the above listed benefits. Telemedicine patient encounters can range from five to eight minutes on average, with a few minutes of preparation time beforehand. In many cases, practices are only adding two or three visits per business day, which means the practice can add incremental revenue at a relatively low administrative burden.

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NowCare Anywhere, a family care center in Northern Illinois, offers telemedicine via a solution from telemedicine software provider eVisit. NowCare's Dr. Gregory Grubb reports that more than 100 of his patients have taken advantage of the 24/7 availability that telemedicine provides. Doing so has improved convenience for patients while lowering Dr. Grubb's overhead. In the first few months of using the solution, he generated $2,000 in incremental income.

"I love the fact that I can reach many more people, especially in rural areas where urgent care clinics are not available. It saves me and them time and money," Dr. Grubb says. "Honestly, if I could solely do telemedicine, then I would."

Highly specialized practices, such as those in behavioral health, can also benefit. In rural areas of the U.S., opioid and other addictions have reached crisis level in small communities that often have limited or no access to addiction treatment specialists. Dr. Andre Haynes of Addiction Telemed in Georgia was frustrated by his inability to help patients in remote areas. Patients, likewise, were often unable to travel long distances to see a treatment provider.

Haynes turned to eVisit's videoconferencing technology to offer telemedicine visits to these patients. Patients are able to address their health

issues with relatively quick telemedicine visits, and in a much more private setting than an office visit.

In addition to being able to see more patients in less time and offer more services, Dr. Haynes reported a revenue increase of $13,00 in just three months. The solution also saves him a significant amount of travel time that can now be spent treating patients.

"Telemedicine with eVisit saves me five to six hours a day," Dr. Hayes says. "Due to the savings, I can expand my services and provide even better, faster care. I'm also making a great new source of income."

Another primary care provider in Oregon was able to offer telemedicine encounters using eVisit's technology, and in the process generated $23,000 in profit while increasing the patient population within the first 12 months. An urgent care in Texas was able to complete 408 telemedicine visits in 12 months, profiting $22,080. Average visit time was 4.5 minutes at that facility.

These productivity and revenue figures are fairly typical for a telemedicine deployment — provided that the technology solution is well designed and supported. Below, you'll find guidance on how to select a telemedicine platform that is both cost-effective and reliable.

Dr. Andre Haynes
Addiction Telemed

"Telemedicine with eVisit saves me five to six hours a day, due to the savings, I can expand my services and provide even better, faster care. I'm also making a great new source of income."

How to Choose a Telemedicine Platform

Implementing telemedicine in a practice can't be an ad hoc process. When it comes to technology in healthcare, providers evaluate secure, standards-compliant telemedicine platforms designed with reliability and patient privacy in mind. Solutions such as Skype and FaceTime are not secure enough to provide this type of compliance, and could leave practices vulnerable to HIPAA violations.

A few key features/functions to look for in any potential solution would include:

- HIPAA compliance, to both ensure the security of ePHI, and to protect the practice from costly HIPAA violations. If the provider works with children under the age of 13, then the solution will also need to be compliant with the Children's Online Privacy Protection (COPPA) rules.

- The solution should be easy to deploy and for staff and patients to use. Multi-step registration, log-in, or appointment scheduling procedures will erode patient engagement over time.

- The solution should easily integrate with your existing EMR, e-prescribing, and/or practice management systems. Physicians should be able to quickly and easily document telemedicine interactions in the patient record so that the entire process is seamless. The telemedicine scheduling tool should also interact with the scheduling features in your existing software. Physicians should be able to easily review medical histories before the visit and have secure access to related documents and labs from within the solution.

- Patients should be able to easily self-schedule a telemedicine visit online, without playing "phone tag" with the doctor or wait on hold with the office scheduler.

- The telemedicine solution provider should offer a business associate agreement (BAA) that will provide risk mitigation. These agreements ensure that if there is a security breach through the software, then the technology provider (not the practice) is held liable.

The platform/vendor should also make it easier to market telemedicine to your current and future patients. The quality of the telemedicine solution will be irrelevant if your patients don't engage with the practice using the technology. Once they know the option is available, secure, and effective, they are typically willing to pay for the convenience of telemedicine, especially if it means avoiding an urgent care or emergency room visit.

Most practices don't have time or expertise to engage in this type of marketing, however. The vendor should provide pre-existing materials, resources, as well as best practices and support to get the word out about the telemedicine option and educate patients.

Technical support is also critical. Does the solution provider offer 24/7 phone and online access to a help desk? This should extend to both providers and patients. Staff will need help ensuring that the visits are correctly scheduled, and physicians will need immediate assistance if there is difficulty in establishing a video link.

Likewise, patients will need to be able to access online support if they have trouble with either the scheduling component or the video visit. A successful visit will require patients to provide access to their web camera as well as other connectivity steps, and less tech-savvy patients may need additional help to initiate these visits.

Conclusion

Telemedicine will be an important part of the patient engagement process for healthcare providers moving forward. Patients are looking for access to care, not necessarily an in-person interaction, and practices that provide a variety of flexible options for that access will be better positioned to succeed in a more competitive, consumer-focused market.

With telemedicine, practices can improve patient access while reducing costs, increasing convenience, and potentially generating new revenue for the practice. With clearly defined goals and a robust telemedicine platform, practices can position themselves to meet the demands of patient consumers that want more flexibility and convenience.

About eVisit

eVisit makes it easy for you to treat your patients anytime, anywhere. Our simple telehealth software platform lets you connect with patients via secure, high-resolution video chat - from your computer or mobile device.

With eVisit, providers have the tools they need to recapture patient visits from urgent care and the ER. Shorter visits, less no-shows, and anywhere access means physicians can optimize patient flow and boost practice revenue.

Patients get high-quality, convenient care from the doctor who knows them best. Providers improve their medical practices and patient care outcomes. Everyone wins.

For more information on how eVisit can work with your organization on a telemedicine solution, please go to:

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