

Why one health insurer is embracing telemedicine

JAN 19, 2016

Staff News Writer

As health technology continues to advance, the evidence base for telemedicine is growing ever stronger. Although many physicians are already putting telemedicine to good use, one major health insurer recently explained why it is embracing telemedicine. Learn some of the compelling reasons more insurers may pay for this form of care delivery.

Physicians gladly accept new technology, “but only on one condition,” said John F. Jesser, vice president of provider engagement strategy at Anthem, “it needs to work. It needs to provide some value [to their practice].”

At the 2016 AMA State Legislative Strategy Conference in Tucson earlier this month, Jesser spoke with physician leaders about why Anthem is embracing telemedicine as a technology that complements physical practice space and in-person interactions, rather than replacing them.

- **Accessibility for minor issues.** Some patients live far from their primary care physician’s office and often have minor issues that may not require a physical exam. Physicians can do their existing patients and themselves “a big favor by seeing [patients] via telehealth, rather than having [them] spend two hours each way on the highway,” Jesser said.
- **Accommodating mobility issues.** Elderly patients or patients with disabilities may have trouble driving, walking to the office or even finding transportation for an appointment. If these appointments are follow-ups and don’t require an in-person physical exam, “you [can avoid making] that patient come in,” he said.
- **Extended hours.** Telemedicine also creates opportunities for after-hours care. “Right now we have doctors with 25-30 state licenses,” he said, “so that a handful of doctors can provide round-the-clock service for when those primary care doctors need to go to bed.”
- **Expanding practice without building.** Physicians never want to turn away patients, but with limited practice space, this sometimes means asking a patient to wait three or more days for an appointment. “Rather than build [another] exam room in their practice,” Jesser said, “[physicians] could add ... another physician and expand their practice without building more brick and mortar.”

But what does all of this mean for the future of physician practices? And what will practices that participate in telemedicine look like?

“We never want to underestimate the physical exam,” Jesser said. “It is critical. There will always be an office or a physical exam room. There will always be a hospital.”

“Patients will look for practices in the same way they look for doctors today,” he said. “They may want a female doctor or someone who speaks Spanish, but they are beginning to add the question, ‘Can I access this doctor on my phone?’”

Physicians must lead the way down the path to telemedicine

The implementation and regulation of telemedicine must be led by doctors, said Pat Basu, MD, chief medical officer of Doctor On Demand, who also spoke to physician leaders during the session. “We have an opportunity to be a part of the solution—if not *the* solution.”

The physician voice is the most important in completing the development of telemedicine in a way that works with practices and not against them. It is important that physicians to continue in leadership roles as telemedicine further develops, or this rapidly evolving area of medicine could easily be driven by those who don’t fully understand the practical application of telemedicine in physician practices.

Interest in telemedicine is high among physicians. Doctor on Demand has more than 10,000 physicians who already have signed up to participate, Dr. Basu reported. “If we move the needle forward and doctors are the ones doing it—that makes me thrilled.”

Both Dr. Basu and Jesser agreed on the next steps for regulating telemedicine. Keeping telemedicine regulation and legislation simple will be important so that physicians are free to exercise their clinical judgement. And making sure that regulation and legislation treat online appointments similar to in-office visits will ensure proper payment for physicians and open this emerging technology in a more efficient way to both patients and physician practices.

What is being done to move telemedicine forward—in the right way

Physicians are attentively following the progress of telemedicine and taking action to shape it in a way that benefits not only their practices but also, and more importantly, the patients they treat.

- With laws in place enforcing coverage for telemedicine services in more than one-half of the country, explore the ways physicians are prepping for its success.
- Released in 2014, AMA model state legislation (log in) provides guidance on licensure, payment and practice issues.

- At its 2014 Annual Meeting, the AMA released the principles of coverage and payment for telemedicine to shape essential elements of telemedicine to ensure patients receive the best possible care.
- It can be difficult to decipher the differences between telemedicine, telehealth and mHealth. Learn how the definitions of digital health differ.