

How telehealth is the Netflix of medicine—and why it matters

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This column is part of a series of firsthand physician accounts that detail how AMA medical group partners are moving medicine to support patient health and the medical profession.

Telehealth has existed since the 1950s, but it feels as though the term really burst onto the health care innovation scene within the past five years. With the booming app economy, which analytics firm App Annie has predicted will eclipse \$6.3 trillion by 2021, users have integrated their devices into everyday tasks, including visits to the doctor.

Yet no single telehealth app or provider has emerged as leader of the pack in the same way that Instagram, for instance, dominates the photo- and video-sharing social media game. Telehealth remains a highly competitive landscape. Beyond user-friendliness and affordability—the hallmarks of a successful app—our experience at Privia shows that a standout telehealth service should fulfill the following criteria.

Understand and appeal to patients

Consumers today are saving time wherever and whenever possible, whether it's having groceries delivered to or streaming the latest blockbuster to skip a trip to the movie theater. This convenience shapes preferences, and it's no wonder that when these consumers become patients they expect the same treatment—pun intended.

Case in point: Between 2015 and 2017, the number of Netflix streaming subscribers doubled from 59 million to 118 million. During the same period, telemedicine patient visits grew by 261%. That's right; telehealth's growth outpaced Netflix.

Physicians and health care organizations should understand their patients are, indeed, consumers. We at Privia have seen great success in adjusting our practices to fit these preferences instead of trying to resist the trends. After all, when you realize a treatment isn't working, you switch the regimen.

For us at Privia, this all boils down to meeting patients where they are. Getting patients "into the office," whether virtually or in person, is a prerequisite for any treatment. We have found that telehealth is a fantastic tool to help connect patients to their physicians, especially patients who have challenges with scheduling, mobility or transportation.

Synchronize and unify

We have learned that the key to meeting patients where they are is ensuring that all encounters and information find their way back into a common repository, namely the patient's electronic health record. The rise of retail clinics, another convenience-driven trend, has led to fragmented care in which physicians do not have all the information they need to treat patients. This disorganization at best complicates the delivery of care and, at worst, can harm patients' health.

Yet mismanaged or underdeveloped telehealth utilization can lead to these same problems. That's why physicians who adopt a telehealth service should ensure the chosen platform is robust and suited to their needs, and to their patients' needs.

As "caretakers" of patients' EHRs, it's especially important for primary care physicians to embrace telehealth. Doing so can help offset patient migration to retail clinics and other nontraditional care settings. Some physicians might not see the value of virtual visits or could be intimidated by what they assume is a steep learning curve.

Our experience at Privia is that physicians new to telehealth are able to get the hang of it with only a handful of visits, and it's not long before they connect the dots on how to best fit virtual visits into their practice workflows.

Capital investment is another barrier to telehealth adoption. So it's useful to reframe telehealth as a tool for patient engagement, one that keeps patients involved in their care management and empowered as a health advocate. Engagement and empowerment are correlated with positive health outcomes which, as we inch closer to value-based care, are rewarded by payers and increase providers' revenue.

Finally, our view at Privia is that investing in telehealth is a way to future-proof a practice. Failure to adopt emerging technologies—especially those as established and demonstrably useful as telehealth—could jeopardize a practice’s future.

Reports show that the majority of patients consider convenience and access to care the most important factors when selecting where to get care. That’s why, at Privia, we have made it a priority to adopt telehealth in a robust, thoughtful way that is a win for our patients, our doctors and the care teams they lead.

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