

Survey: Physicians laud telehealth's value, still find barriers

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Kevin B. O'Reilly

News Editor

New survey results shed light on how physicians have widely made use of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic while showing that there remain payment challenges for doctors and technology barriers for patients. The AMA House of Delegates, meanwhile, recently took action to push forward telehealth advocacy during the policymaking body's November 2020 AMA Special Meeting.

More than 75% of respondents to the Telehealth Impact Physician Survey said telehealth enabled them to provide quality care for COVID-19-related care, acute care, chronic disease management, hospital or emergency department follow-up, care coordination, preventative care, and mental or behavioral health.

The 48-question survey, conducted over the summer, captured the opinions of 1,594 physicians and other health professionals. Among those surveyed, 87% were medical doctors and 13% were nonphysicians such as nurse practitioners, psychologists, physician assistants and social workers.

The survey is part of a telehealth study prepared by the COVID-19 Healthcare Coalition's Telehealth Work Group, comprised of the AMA, American Telemedicine Association, Mayo Clinic and others. The coalition is made up of health care organizations, technology firms, nonprofits, academia and startups.

Sixty percent reported that telehealth has improved the health of their patients, while more than 80% indicated that telehealth improved the timeliness of care for their patients. A similar percentage said that their patients have reacted favorably to using telehealth for care.

"Telehealth and remote care services have proven critical to the management of COVID-19, while also ensuring uninterrupted care for 100 million Americans with chronic conditions. How telehealth will be used after the pandemic is in the balance, and no one wants to see new access to telehealth suddenly halted," said AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD.

"The time is now for government officials, physicians, patients, and other stakeholders to work together on a solid plan to support telehealth services going forward. Future telehealth policies should

be data driven, and the Telehealth Impact Study provides important insights to guide necessary decisions,” Dr. Bailey said.

AMA’s telehealth advocacy

Bipartisan legislation was recently introduced in both the House and Senate to make the expanded access to telehealth services permanent. The Telehealth Modernization Act of 2020 (H.R. 8727/S. 4375) would lift the rural-only restriction and add any site where a patient is located as a potential originating site.

This would ensure all Medicare beneficiaries may receive covered Medicare telehealth benefits, including at home and via mobile technologies as appropriate. Physicians can contact their congressional representatives to ask them to support the Telehealth Modernization Act.

At the November 2020 AMA Special Meeting, the House of Delegates directed the AMA to “continue to advocate for the widespread adoption of telehealth services in the practice of medicine for physicians and physician-led teams post SARS-COV-2.”

The AMA also will “advocate that the federal government, including the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and other agencies, state governments and state agencies, and the health insurance industry, adopt clear and uniform laws, rules, regulations and policies” on telehealth services that:

- Provide equitable coverage that allows patients to access telehealth services wherever they are located.
- Provide for the use of accessible devices and technologies, with appropriate privacy and security protections, for connecting physicians and patients
- Advocate for equitable access to telehealth services, especially for at-risk and under-resourced patient populations and communities, including but not limited to supporting increased funding and planning for telehealth infrastructure such as broadband and internet-connected devices for both physician practices and patients.
- Support the use of telehealth to reduce health disparities and promote access to health care.

New telehealth procedures can be a powerful weapon in the fight against COVID-19. Find out how the AMA is advancing telemedicine during the COVID-19 pandemic.