Expansion of telehealth services must be sustained

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The rapid growth and large-scale adoption of telehealth services over the past 18 months has allowed physicians to deliver a broad range of badly needed services to patients nationwide in an innovative, cost-effective manner. Now it’s time to cement that success by making permanent the temporary easing of restrictions that brought the full potential of telehealth into focus.

Congress can brighten this picture by passing legislation already introduced into the current session that enjoys bipartisan support. Among other steps that need to be taken, the pending legislation—CONNECT for Health Act of 2021 (S 1512) and the Telehealth Modernization Act (HR 1332)—would strip away all geographic restrictions placed on telehealth services and allow Medicare recipients to receive this care in their own homes, rather than being forced to travel to an authorized health care center to receive it.

Although this provision has been waived for the duration of the public health emergency trigged by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to provide telehealth services directly to patients regardless of their location will be lost unless Congress acts. Physicians and their patients who have witnessed firsthand the immense benefits and value of telehealth services must not be forced to stop using these widely available tools for better health simply because the pandemic is over.

Telehealth has improved health care

The benefits of telehealth are obvious. Telehealth enables physicians to strengthen continuity of care, extend access outside of normal clinic hours, and ease the impact of clinician shortages in rural areas and among underserved populations.

By increasing the quantity and quality of communication between patients and physicians, telehealth has strengthened the trust that lies at the center of this relationship. Telehealth can slice overall health care costs by helping physician practices and health care systems better manage diabetes, heart disease and other chronic illnesses while increasing the overall quality of care and patient
This technology can also prevent patients from delaying care for conditions that, if undetected and untreated, can trigger emergency department visits or lengthy hospital stays. Wide-ranging case-study examples of the comprehensive value that virtual care can provide are featured in the AMA’s Return on Health research issued in May.

And let’s not forget the value of telehealth services to patients with impaired mobility, the immunocompromised, frail or elderly individuals who require the aid of a caregiver to travel, and those who cannot arrange the transportation or child care they need to receive care. The enhanced opportunities telehealth affords to assess the impact of patients’ social determinants of health lays the groundwork for better treatment and improved health outcomes for historically marginalized and minoritized communities.

The widespread expansion of telehealth services we have witnessed serves all of these patient populations and others in an efficient and cost-effective manner that must be sustained. While the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has expanded its coverage for telehealth services during the pandemic, only action by Congress will ensure that Medicare beneficiaries will enjoy full access to those services once the pandemic is behind us.

The expansion of telehealth covered by Medicare at payment parity with in-person services during the COVID-19 public health emergency includes more than 150 services, including emergency department visits, hospital admissions and discharges, critical care and home care, to name just a few. Offering this equivalency remains a critical factor in ensuring that physician practices can cover the additional costs tied to virtual care provision.

How we support greater telehealth adoption

Our AMA’s commitment to telehealth technologies grows stronger each day. For example, our Telehealth Immersion Program helps individual physicians, physician practices and health systems expand and optimize telehealth services through interactive peer-to-peer training sessions, curated webinars, clinical best practices, virtual care boot camps and other assets.

Additional resources, including a Telehealth Quick Guide, Telehealth Playbook, and STEPS Forward™ telehealth training module, are just three more examples among many available on our website.

The Digital Medicine Payment Advisory Group is a collaborative initiative convened by the AMA to help integrate digital medicine technologies into clinical practice by knocking down barriers to widespread adoption while zeroing in on comprehensive solutions for issues with coding,
reimbursement, coverage and related factors.

The mission of this diverse cross section of nationally recognized digital medicine experts includes:

- Reviewing existing code sets—particularly CPT® and HCPCS—to ensure they accurately reflect current digital medicine services and technologies.
- Assessing factors that affect the fair and accurate valuation of services delivered in this manner.
- Providing information and clinical expertise that promotes widespread coverage of telehealth, remote patient monitoring and all other digital medicine services, including increased transparency of services covered by payers and improved enforcement of parity coverage laws.

The expansion of physician-based telehealth services in 2020 ranks as one of the most important advances in health care delivery in many years. Allowing this progress to slip from our hands because of outdated and arbitrary restrictions will result in higher costs and poorer health outcomes for patients everywhere.

The decisions made and the policies adopted in the near future will shape the direction of telehealth services for many years to come. We urge Congress and the Biden administration to take the steps necessary to build on the progress in virtual care we’ve made thus far while laying the foundation for greater innovation going forward.