Now is the time for doctors to shape what’s next on telehealth

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More than a year and a half into this pandemic, medicine finds itself with a unique opportunity: A chance to rethink and overhaul the way care is delivered.

Telehealth, which a minority of patients and physicians used prior to COVID-19’s emergence, is now a household word. And survey after survey shows that patients like the convenience, believe they are getting quality care and still feel connected to their physicians. Most physicians, too, have found telehealth to be a great way to connect with patients when appropriate.

“There is no question at this point in time, when you think back on the past 18 months, it’s our opportunity to change completely how we deliver care,” according to Joseph C. Kvedar, MD, professor of dermatology at Harvard Medical School and the American Telemedicine Association’s board chair.

Dr. Kvedar made that point during a virtual gathering as part of the AMA Telehealth Immersion Program. The boot camp event featured experts and stakeholders from around the country, who discussed the potential for long-term telehealth programs, raised the questions that need to be considered as telemedicine evolves, and examined the challenges that physicians and patients face moving forward.

“I would urge you not to think of virtual video visits as the sky or the ceiling or the vision, but as the floor and the beginning, and the first step into what I would call a real hybrid world with digital-first, with digital tools for our patients where patients instinctively turn to a digital device when they need health care and go from there,” Dr. Kvedar said.

The boot camp also included a panel discussion about health-at-home models and strategies, as well as breakout sessions on creating telehealth value in obstetrics and gynecology, and renal medicine.

The Telehealth Immersion Program is part of the AMA STEPS Forward™ Innovation Academy, which enables physicians to learn from peers and experts and discover ways to implement time-
saving practice innovation strategies.

Many questions to answer

Data may show that the percentage of telehealth visits as a whole are down compared with the beginning of the pandemic, but Dr. Kvedar said there’s another story to be told.

Data from one large payer shows that telehealth is shifting from local physicians and health care organizations to national care providers. In April 2020, 96% of all telehealth claims were local, while national providers accounted for just 4%. One year later, the share of national-provider claims rose to 11%.

One big question going forward, he asked, is who is going to deliver telehealth services?

“Do we want our own doctors to be providing these telehealth services or do we want to go through a third party,” said Dr. Kvedar, co-chair of the AMA Digital Medicine Payment Advisory Group. “The good news is you will have access either way. But … we have to ponder how we want that to go, and I think we have a role to play in making those decisions or at least in influencing them.”

Among the other questions that need to be answered going forward:

- How do you plan while facing payment uncertainty?
- What will it cost a practice to offer telehealth and what will make the most financial sense for each practice? How do you rethink calculations of overhead?
- What are the workforce implications? For example, what new roles will be needed to accommodate telehealth properly?
- How do you define when it will be best to see a patient via telehealth versus coming into the office?

Advocate, advocate, advocate

Dr. Kvedar asked the boot-camp attendees to send their elected officials a letter describing what has worked in telemedicine and what is needed. He also recommended talking to your human resource professional and health plan contact to let them know what you and your patients need to create a health system that works best.

The benefits of expanded telemedicine are clear. Join physicians who are advocating to permanently expand virtual care coverage.


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