

In 2022, moving beyond telehealth to digitally enabled care

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Telehealth represented less than 1% of the total health care volume in the United States prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and more than half of physicians used telehealth for the first time in the pandemic's first few months.

Subsequent research shows physicians have overwhelmingly responded positively to its implementation.

- 85% indicated that telehealth increased timeliness of care.
- 75% said telehealth allowed them to deliver high-quality care.
- More than 70% were motivated to increase telehealth use.

That last statistic is particularly exciting to Meg Barron, the AMA's vice president of digital health innovations.

"Telehealth is here to stay," she said. "It's not whether telehealth will be offered, but how best to offer telehealth services as we move toward what we're terming digitally enabled care—which is not just hybrid care, but more so fully integrated in-person and virtual care based on clinical appropriateness."

Barron discussed the implementation of telehealth and its future in a recent episode of "AMA Moving Medicine."

Understanding telehealth's value

Physicians are not the only ones who responded positively to the presence of telehealth. Patients also found added value in having a digital opportunity to connect and interact with their care team.

"We know that both patients and physicians want telehealth to continue," Barron said, "and also that they want the option and convenience and access of that virtual care modality to stay in place, in addition to in-person care."

Recognizing that increased interest, the AMA developed a new framework to measure the comprehensive value of virtual care. The goal was to understand how to optimize virtual care beyond just a return-on-investment perspective, but also for patient, physician and caregiver satisfaction, patient access, and health equity.

The “Return on Health” framework consists of six value streams that demonstrate ways virtual care models can generate value. Each value stream has specific metrics that can be used to measure the value of virtual care programs.

The six value streams include:

- Clinical outcomes, quality and safety.
- Access to care.
- Patient, family and caregiver experience.
- Clinician experience.
- Financial and operational impact.
- Health equity.

The framework can be used by physicians, health care organizations, payers and policymakers. Care providers can use it to develop and evaluate new models for care, and payers and policymakers can use it to support long-term fair and equitable payment for clinicians to sustain virtual care services.

Meanwhile, the AMA Telehealth Immersion Program guides physicians, practices and health systems as they work to optimize and sustain telehealth in their organization.

“This is a series of educational modules that focus on moving beyond adoption [and] really optimizing telehealth in your own practice environment,” Barron said.

The Telehealth Immersion Program, part of the AMA STEPS Forward™ Innovation Academy, provides clinical best practices, virtual care expansion opportunities, and how to successfully scale and sustain telehealth in practice. Included in the program is a series of webinars, peer-to-peer learning opportunities, virtual discussions, and additional on-demand resources.

The Telehealth Immersion Program’s first 2022 event, “Developing Digital Empathy & The Virtual Physical Exam,” takes place Jan. 26. Register now.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.