

How telehealth can enhance mental health care integration

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With the nation in its third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, people are under tremendous stress. Even patients who in general have been well-adjusted and healthy, particularly children and adolescents, are finding they need mental health care.

Using technology to integrate behavioral health care into primary care settings—settings that patients are visiting on a regular basis for routine care or other medical needs—is a key way to help patients access the mental health care they need in a system that doesn't have enough providers to meet the demand for behavioral health care.

Parinda Khatri, PhD, CEO of Cherokee Health Systems in Knoxville, Tennessee, discussed about how physicians can use technology to help integrate mental health care in their practices and combat the growing behavioral health crisis during an episode of “AMA Moving Medicine” on the use of technology in behavioral health integration.

“We have a tremendous opportunity right now to change the trajectory of the health and well-being of the people in our community,” Khatri said.

Supporting telehealth is a critical component of the AMA Recovery Plan for America's Physicians. You took care of the nation. It's time for the nation to take care of you. It's time to rebuild. And the AMA is ready.

Telehealth is critical to the future of health care, which is why the AMA continues to lead the charge to aggressively expand telehealth policy, research and resources to ensure physician practice sustainability and fair payment.

The pandemic allowed for a complete disruption of the way things were done and allowed virtual care to play a role, sometimes being the only way to provide care, said Khatri, a trained psychologist who moved from the role of chief clinical officer to CEO at Cherokee Health Systems after appearing on

“AMA Moving Medicine” in May.

“Right now is the time [for change]. We know what it’s like with the old way. Where our systems have been siloed and access to mental health care is very difficult,” she said. “Anything we can do open up access to enhance the behavioral health capacity ... will undoubtedly have an impact on the quality of life of our patients.”

Advantages to using telehealth

Khatri said that physicians and other health professionals should recognize that virtual technology won’t replace them. Instead, it is an added way to open up access to patients. Some patients love in-person care, while others prefer virtual because it may save them a long drive. Some people enjoy having a choice.

“What this technology does is it allows us to tailor the kind of care that we want to partner with patients in providing,” said Khatri, whose health system asks patients which type of visit they would prefer. “It’s a wonderful way of taking care to the next level.”

It’s also a very powerful tool for the physician, she said. For example, if a doctor is worried because a patient doesn’t show up for an appointment, it can be a wonderful touch point without the patient having to come into the clinic.

Tools to guide your practice

The AMA, with Manatt Health, created a report that outlines the opportunities and challenges of incorporating telehealth and other digital tools to help practices more quickly implement behavioral health integration (BHI).

The “Accelerating and Enhancing Behavioral Health Integration Through Digitally Enabled Care: Opportunities and Challenges” (PDF) report:

- Defines the opportunities and limitations to incorporating technology to advance BHI.
- Explores practical solutions stakeholders can take to advance digitally-enabled BHI.

- Demonstrates how to use the AMA’s “Return on Health” framework to measure the value of digitally-enabled BHI models.

The AMA established the BHI Collaborative with seven other leading physician organizations to catalyze effective and sustainable integration of behavioral and mental health care into physician practices. Learn more with the collaborative’s “Overcoming Obstacles” webinar series.

Also, check out the BHI Collaborative’s Behavioral Health Integration Compendium, which provides health care organizations with a proven pathway for delivering integrated behavioral health care and ensuring they have the most recent, actionable information at their disposal.