Overcoming barriers to digitally enabled mental health care integration

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Tanya Albert Henry
Contributing News Writer
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The number of patients who need access to mental health services growing, yet there continues to be a shortfall of health professionals who can meet that demand.

Nearly 40% of American adults reported depression and anxiety symptoms in 2021, far higher than the 10% who reported those symptoms just three years earlier. And in 2020, 71% of parents told researchers that they believed the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their child’s mental health.

Behavioral health integration (BHI) will be essential in easing the nation’s mental health crisis and incorporating digitally enabled care into BHI can help physicians reach even more people in need of care, experts from the AMA and Manatt Health said during a recent AMA webinar.

They discussed the opportunities and limitations of using technology to support BHI, as well as solutions to help address areas that are preventing more physicians from adopting BHI. The information is explored in even more depth in the organizations’ joint report, “Accelerating and Enhancing Behavioral Health Integration Through Digitally Enabled Care: Opportunities and Challenges” (PDF).

Leaders from three other organizations shared how they’ve put digitally enabled BHI into action across the country.

“All stakeholders across the board ... really have to work together to make digitally enabled BHI a standard across the country,” Christopher Botts, the AMA’s senior manager, care delivery and payment, said during the webinar. “There is also a general recognition that digital tools … [can] accelerate BHI adoption and help remove barriers that have existed over the past several years.”

Defining opportunities, limitations

During the webinar, Botts discussed the opportunities and limitations of using technology to support BHI.
Among the opportunities:

- Support for care integration.
- Limited care fragmentation.
- Generated value for patients and providers.

In addition, the AMA Return Health Framework can help measure BHI’s value for your practice.

Among the limitations:

- Technology won’t completely replace in-person interactions or patient assessments.
- Robust clinical or economic evidence isn’t there yet to support major regulatory and coverage decisions.
- Technology within BHI is not clinically appropriate for, or available to, all people.
- Patients, physicians and health professionals may not be able to use technology effectively based on personal preferences, in addition to potential gaps in digital literacy and or broadband access.

Breaking down barriers

Jared Augenstein, Manatt Health’s Director, shared ways for various groups in the health care system to address gaps hindering BHI’s widespread adoption.

For example, physician practices and health systems can:

- Increase diagnosis and treatment rates by incorporating evidence-based digital solutions into standard workflows.
- Implement technologies that facilitate care coordination and enable highly collaborative care.

Health plans and coverage programs can:

- Expand coverage and fair payment with a margin for all stakeholders using BHI models.
- Evaluate how and when to apply cost-sharing for integrated services, whether delivered in person or via telehealth.
- Minimize or eliminate utilization management practices for BHI services.

Federal and state policymakers can:
Work with health plans and coverage programs to limit utilization management review practices, enforce behavioral health parity laws and strengthen network adequacy regulations.

Increase federal funding with the aim of growing the behavioral health workforce, especially for those practicing in underserved areas.

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.

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.