Health care’s future
How telemedicine and telehealth are increasing access

When it comes to telemedicine and telehealth, the future is most definitely now. Advances in technology have spurred advances in telemedicine and carry with it the potential to increase access to care, improve quality and reduce costs.

“Telehealth solutions have the capacity to improve the quality of care, improve access to care and reduce the cost of delivering care,” says Dr. Stephen Perkins, vice president of Medical Affairs for UPMC Health Plan. “It has the potential to reduce costs for both physicians and patients.”

Smart Business spoke with Perkins about telemedicine and telehealth and its potential to improve care and reduce costs.

What is the difference between telehealth and telemedicine?
Telehealth is a general term describing the delivery of health-related services and information by the use of telecommunication technology. It can include phone calls between physicians, videoconferencing or even robotic technology.

Telemedicine has a narrower definition: The specific use of medical information that is exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications for the health and education of a patient or a health care provider for the purpose of improving patient care. It includes consultative, diagnostic and treatment services.

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Historically, hospitals and health systems in rural areas have been most closely connected with telemedicine, as travel times and a lack of specialty physicians has made telemedicine more attractive. However, the entire health care industry, urban and rural, national and even international could benefit from its widespread use.

What are the most significant benefits from telehealth and telemedicine?
Certainly, the top benefit would be increased access both for patients and physicians.

Patients who live in remote areas have not always had access to the latest medical advances. With telemedicine, there is the capacity for specialists to evaluate a patient’s condition from afar. Homebound patients could have their conditions monitored and reduce the number of trips they need to make to a physician’s office.

Telehealth technology breaks down many barriers to access to care.

What technologies are used in telehealth?
Many different technologies can be used. Among them are: videoconferencing, use of the Internet, store-and-forward imaging, streaming media, terrestrial communications and wireless communications.

What are some examples of telehealth?
Telehealth can mean e-visits, whereby patients do not have to come into their physician’s office for a routine problem, but correspond via Internet and may even get a prescription for their condition, if needed. This way, routine matters do not tie up a physician’s time, and patients do not need to miss work or arrange for day care in order to get medical advice for minor matters.

In some instances when someone has a chronic condition requiring consistent monitoring, or they are homebound with a stroke, a telestroke program allows them to be seen by a specialist.

Are there barriers to telehealth becoming more widespread?
Telemedicine implementation can be expensive and time consuming, which may make it difficult for health system executives to see the value, especially since not all patients will use the services.

In addition, with telehealth’s ability to transcend state boundaries, there may be issues regarding licensing and certification. Policies regarding telehealth licensing vary greatly between states.

How will this impact health care costs?
While the initial cost of the technology may be high, the overall impact should be to reduce costs. If monitoring a condition becomes easier because of telehealth access to patients, that should improve preventive care and reduce the number of emergencies, which will help to hold down costs. If telehealth advances can bring specialist care to places where it has never been before, that, too, should mean more effective treatments and, ultimately, lower costs.

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EVENT
Worksite Population Health Management Seminar,
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