

When Primary Care Goes Viral: Telemedicine and the COVID-19 Impact

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The call to embrace virtual care is more urgent than ever. Yet in the wake of the coronavirus, the need for virtual solutions has quickly surpassed what many healthcare providers were prepared to provide their patients.

OTN, a not-for-profit providing virtual care solutions and recently became part of Ontario Health, reported 22,000 new account requests since March of this year. (1)

Virtual Care in the Age of Coronavirus

Virtual care is a powerful tool to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Virtual care may involve phone and online consultations, emails, text messages, remote monitoring, webcasts, and video visits. COVID-19 patient care largely occurs via video visits, and these can pertain to symptom assessment, palliative care, and visits in long-term/retirement homes.

With virtual visits, healthcare providers can:

- Screen patients
- Gather patient history
- Assess symptoms, severity, and treatment options
- Monitor progress and check in on patients in isolation
- Communicate with multiple people at once
- Connect with colleagues to share information and seek clinical input/advice

One of the major advantages of the rise of telemedicine, both now and for the future of healthcare, is accessibility. In the short-term, clinics being told to delay non-urgent visits can transition to virtual visits to minimize risks to patients and staff. At the same time, the rise of virtual care is paving the way for easier and more convenient access in the future. A wider demographic of patients and their caregivers will be able to access healthcare, how and when they want it.

The rise in urgency of care brought about by COVID-19 has led to further innovations in telemedicine and virtual care. Direct-to-patient video visits have led to the modernization of compensation, so that patients can have a video visit and take care of billing from their own device. The range of virtual care services has also widened to include electronic secure messaging using a broader range of technologies.

What This Means for Clinicians

In light of the move to virtual, clinicians need to think about three things:

1. Screening their patients who are ill or worried that they're ill. This means:

- Using EMR-enabled virtual tools to assess illness and direct patients quickly to appropriate forms of care (e.g. in-office visit, screening/testing facilities, ER, or self-care)
 - Using clinical notes to record virtual visits
2. Caring for patients with suspected COVID-19. This means:
 - Monitoring and keeping in contact virtually with patients who have symptoms
 - Reassessing patients virtually if their symptoms are worsening
 3. Caring for other patients in their practice with the intent to decrease exposure to those who may be ill. This means:
 - Using virtual care tools to avoid making unnecessary trips to the office
 - Using virtual care tools to manage chronic disease and other acute illnesses that may not require a physical exam (2)

New Insurance Liabilities

Many of the widespread use of virtual and telemedicine technologies have been implemented relatively quickly. This poses new or increased cyber risks for both clinicians and clinics.

For example, privacy and cyber concerns come into play with doctors sharing client information with their patients, colleagues, and caregivers over email, video, text messaging. Clinicians need advice on choosing the right platform, taking into consideration its ease of use, security features, and capacity for privacy protection.

Clinics need to prioritize patients and their problems in order to determine whether virtual care is advisable. Patients also must have given their consent prior to using virtual care technologies.

Businesses should remain vigilant to ensure they are engaged in cyber defense best practices, are aware of any possible vulnerabilities to ransomware as early as possible, and have a security plan in place that ensures back-ups of sensitive information and secure login practices

MedThree Insurance Supports Clinicians in the Move to Virtual

Visit our website for more information on how MedThree's tailored insurance policies can meet the needs of your organization during this crisis and beyond.

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Sources:

1. <https://otn.ca/covid-19/>
2. <https://www.oma.org/>