

Telemedicine: Improving Women's Access to Health Care Through Innovation

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Telemedicine is the delivery of any health care service or the transmission of health information using telecommunications technology. It includes videoconferencing, transmission of still images, patient portals, remote monitoring of vital signs, and more.¹ It has been used for more than 40 years to increase access to care by delivering health care services to patients in rural and underserved areas.²

Our Health Care System Depends on Telemedicine

The benefits of telemedicine extend far beyond improving access to care. Telemedicine makes our health care system more efficient, improves quality of care, helps contain costs by facilitating chronic disease management, addresses staffing shortages by enabling access to a team of health care professionals, reduces travel times for patients and providers, and decreases the length and number of hospital stays. It has also been found to improve patient satisfaction by providing access to health professionals and services that would otherwise require traveling long distances and incurring additional costs.³

“Telehealth does not necessarily change the care providers give. Rather, it changes the communication channel between clinicians and patients to minimize geographic barriers and enhance delivery of service.”

—Dr. Bonnie Wakefield, Associate Research Professor, Missouri University Sinclair School of Nursing, 2008

For example, telemedicine is regularly used to expand access to wound care, radiology, obstetric and gynecological care, as well as primary care. It can also facilitate care delivery for patients who require translators or have disabilities that affect their mobility. While the use of telemedicine technology such as patient portals and transmission of still images is already commonplace, it is expected to become a standard practice of medicine in coming years as federal incentives for adopting health information technology are accelerating its implementation, and as new payment models necessitate more effective and efficient provision and coordination of care.

Road Trips: Not as Fun When the Destination is Your Doctor's Office

The United States is facing a health care workforce crisis that has stretched providers to their

limits and jeopardized access to care for millions of Americans. One in five Americans have inadequate or no access to a primary care physician⁴ and access to specialty care is even more limited. Low-income Americans and those living in rural and medically-underserved areas face additional economic and geographic barriers to care. They are often the ones most disadvantaged by our strained health care system.

Without telemedicine, millions of Americans must travel long distances just to see a doctor. Here are some reasons:

- ▶ The United States has 191 physicians for every 100,000 people. In rural areas, that ratio is 73 percent lower.⁵
- ▶ While nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population – a total of 62 million people – lives in rural areas, only about 10 percent of physicians practice in rural areas.⁶
- ▶ Sixty million Americans lack adequate access to primary care due to a shortage of primary care physicians in their communities,⁷ and this shortage is only going to get worse. The Association of American Medical Colleges projects a shortage of 124,000 physicians by 2020, and 37 percent of the gap is primary care providers.⁸

Increased utilization of telemedicine allows providers to reach more patients. For example, in both rural and urban areas, telemedicine can be used to triage patient care, reserving limited appointment times for those who need to be seen in person, and providing more routine elements of care via telemedicine. The Medical Association of Georgia recommends using telemedicine to increase access to specialty care by enabling trauma specialists to consult with doctors in smaller emergency rooms until a patient can be transferred to a major trauma center.⁹

Rural Women Face “Insurmountable” Barriers to Care

Rural women experience significant health disparities when compared to their urban counterparts, and disparities experienced by rural minority women are even greater.¹⁰

- ▶ Rural women experience higher rates of obesity, suicide, cervical cancer, and limitations caused by chronic health conditions than women living in urban areas. Rural women are also less likely to receive recommended preventive health services.¹¹
- ▶ Many rural areas have a particular shortage of obstetric and gynecologic care providers. Nearly 6 million women live in counties without a single obstetrician-gynecologist.¹²
- ▶ Ninety-seven percent of non-metropolitan counties have no abortion provider. Nonhospital abortion providers estimate that 10 percent of their patients travel 50 to 100 miles, and 8 percent more than 100 miles.¹³

“In rural areas in the United States, women may have to travel for hours to see a physician, and this can be an insurmountable barrier to care. Being able to meet with a doctor using telemedicine could help address disparities in access to health care and improve women’s health and well-being.”

—Dr. Daniel Grossman, Senior Associate, Ibis Reproductive Health, 2011

Access to obstetric and gynecological care has been further restricted by closures of hospital-based obstetric services and the lack of sufficient

incentives for health care providers to practice in rural areas. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends encouraging health care providers “to utilize effective telemedicine technologies to expand and improve services for rural women.”¹⁴

Telemedicine Can *Increase* Safety for Patients

Consulting with a doctor over video conference may not be the traditional office visit, but studies and practice have shown that care delivered via telemedicine is not only safe and effective, **but can actually increase the safety and effectiveness of care.** For example, a study of heart failure patients by the University of Missouri found that telemedicine allowed for earlier detection of key warning signs in patients and more timely interventions by providers.¹⁵ According to the same study, telemedicine patients also experienced fewer hospital readmissions. Another study comparing patients with chronic illnesses receiving care through in-person visits and telemedicine found no significant differences between quality of care indicators such as patients’ self-management and medication use, or patient satisfaction.¹⁶

By increasing access to care through more frequent and patient-centered communication with qualified providers, telemedicine yields great results in improving the quality, safety and efficiency of our health care system.

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3 *Ibid* 2

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11 *Ibid* 10

12 *Ibid* 10

13 *Ibid* 10

14 *Ibid* 10

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The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at www.NationalPartnership.org.

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