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**Finding Quality
in Home Care:
The Path from
Good to Great**

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Telehealth and Quality

By Merrily Orsini



In terms of medical practice, innovations in telecommunications systems and technology mean reaching more patients than ever before. Telehealth is making health care more accessible to people who have traditionally found it difficult or even impossible to benefit from modern modes of treatment or preventative care.

Telehealth has been shown to maintain or improve on the quality offered by traditional care and can keep the patient from hospitalization. The benefits of telehealth are important to consider and seem to maintain, if not improve, the quality of care. In 1998, the Institute of Medicine report "Crossing the Quality Chasm" identified the part that automated clinical procedures and recordkeeping have in reducing human error. The quality of care via telehealth can be defined in other ways as well. For example, expanded access to primary and secondary health care improves not only the quality of care, but the quality of life in places where access to care is scarce at best.

Telehealth vs. Hospitalization

Obviously, some conditions require care that goes beyond what telehealth can offer. Infusions, wound care, and other such conditions may not be suitable for telehealth. Remote monitoring is most commonly enlisted for treating patients with chronic conditions such as congestive heart failure (CHF) and diabetes. Services such as teleradiology provide faster turnaround times between specialists and clinicians for everything from broken bones to mammograms, thus contributing to improvements in quality of care.

How and when an organization uses telehealth depends on its patient popu-

lations, organizational structure, budget, and staff acceptance of relatively new technology. For example, some agencies will staff a central referral center to handle telehealth. Patients can call in any time of the day or night, and any nurse in the center can perform assessments and consult with physicians, if necessary, without contacting the nurse on call for an expensive in-home visit.

Typically, diabetes is one of the most difficult and expensive chronic diseases to manage, but telehealth can change the way people deal with this disease. Patient education and compliance are critical in these cases. An example of the effects of telehealth on disease management is the Visiting Nurse Association of Greater Philadelphia use of telehealth equipment to support home visits. They created 25-minute video for patients with diabetes, and were able to cover information and education the patient on topics such as diet, blood glucose monitoring, medication use, hyper and hypoglycemia, and complications of diabetes. Blood glucose readings were graphed to illustrate to the patient how glucose correlates to diet and insulin use. The graph also enabled the patient's physician to quickly assess the patient's condition and adjust medications as necessary. All this was completed in the safety and privacy of the patient's home, eliminating the need for a trip to a hospital or doctor's office.

Additionally, congestive heart failure (CHF) requires rigorous disease manage-

ment to improve quality and longevity of life. Through the use of telehealth technology, patients are offered independence and the ability to perform sophisticated clinical and diagnostic measurements in the comfort of their own home, including O₂ saturation, heart and lung sounds, and electrocardiograms.

Reaching the Remote Patient

Telehealth works well for typical patients who have access to health care in cities or towns, but it also serves patients who are not within reach of traditional medical care available in hospitals or doctor's offices. In remote areas such as mountain villages or small islands, telehealth brings health care into the twenty-first century.

Studies have shown that in remote areas, many patients would have required a trip to the emergency room and possible re-hospitalization if they did not have access to telehealth services. There are clear clinical and economic benefits of providing patients direct access to practitioners via telehealth technology.

In a study of remote village access to health care in Quebec, Canada, results indicate that telehealth benefits include better access to specialized services in remote regions, improved continuity of care, and increased availability of information. Physicians' practices also benefit through the availability of continuing medical education, interaction with

peers, and access to second opinions.

Telehealth allows a tailored amount and type of information to be sent into the patient's home, and the potential exists to significantly expand both the information and the services that can be provided through telehealth. Services that include better educating of the patient, keeping in contact with the patient, providing medication reminders, or performing assessments, can be relatively cost effective and clearly beneficial.

Another Example of Care

Another example of telehealth in action features a woman with breast cancer who recently underwent surgery and chemotherapy. She can use home telecare equipment to use videoconferencing equipment to connect with a psychotherapist or mental health counselor. Telehealth equipment enables these visits via the patient's television set and cable television lines, as well as a boxed

videocamera on top of the television that operates easily. She can also plan menus for herself using electronic menu planners, which take into account dietary restrictions she may have, and hospital dietitians can work with her. Telehealth allows the woman to get medication reminders through a telephone voice mail system.

Where Telehealth Succeeds

Recovering at home has powerful benefits over recovering in a hospital or other medical facility. Studies suggest that home convalescence actually speeds up the healing process, and that mental health counseling is more effective when conducted via televideo conference. Clearly, this practice allows the patient to enjoy the security, privacy, and flexibility of connecting with a counselor while surrounded by familiar territory. Telehealth technology also appears to offer providers and patients even more opportunities

to connect with each other.

By reducing illness through disease management at home, telehealth creates a situation where hospitalization is reduced. The instances of medical errors are reduced by automating clinical protocols. User-friendly telehealth equipment may eventually translate into the patient's taking effective preventative measures for self-care.

Telehealth programs can help patients self manage or to simply understand procedures after home care visits, and can aid in the healing process, help educate patients, and thereby make patients active participants in their own care. These examples indicate the quality of telehealth, and how telehealth can easily support traditional means of care.

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