



ONLINE CARE

*Growing Your Practice
With Telehealth*





Executive Summary

With billions of dollars budgeted for healthcare reform, legislators are frantically looking for ways the money can truly change the broken system, without upsetting key stakeholders. Many Americans – including some very prominent ones – are pointing to telehealth as part of the solution. In his State of the Union Address, President Obama called out telehealth’s promise, going so far as to cite “a patient who can have face-to-face video chats with her doctor.”

With telehealth, physicians use technology to overcome traditional barriers of geography, mobility, and time to deliver care to patients in need. As a new generation of technologies has become ubiquitous – no more exotic than the Web or a phone – telehealth has begun shifting into the medical mainstream. A series of studies illustrating telehealth’s clinical efficacy has accelerated this trend. Telehealth allows healthcare services to finally enter the patient’s home.

Telehealth’s benefits extend to physician practices of all sizes. First, telehealth addresses the growing imbalance between demand for, and supply of, care by projecting medical services where they are needed most. In addition, practices can employ telehealth technologies to fuel their growth and improve patient care by:

- **Enabling new revenue streams**, by monetizing previously unpaid patient interactions and providing new services without overhead – such as remote visits, specialty consults and concierge services;
- **Reducing costs** and improving patient outcomes through better management of patients under risk and more effective care coordination;
- **Creating new flexibility** by alleviating administrative burden and allowing doctors to provide care from wherever they are.

To realize these benefits, physicians need a practical tool to incorporate telehealth into their practice. Online Care for Providers offers a solution that allows physicians to quickly launch a virtual practice and begin seeing patients using the Web or phone. This paper will:

- Examine the role of telehealth in the current healthcare environment;
 - Detail how practices should enlist telehealth to meet their needs;
 - Introduce Online Care For Providers as a solution to realize the promise of telehealth.
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What Is Online Care?

Online Care offers physicians the ability to deliver live healthcare services to patients online through a virtual practice. With Online Care, physicians can make themselves available for online and phone consultations at any time, from any location, and for as long as they choose. Online Care can facilitate immediate online interactions or allow the scheduling of future online appointments with current and new patients. Physicians and patients only need an Internet connection, browser, and/or telephone line to engage in an Online Care encounter.

During the Online Care visit itself, physicians can see and talk to the patient through live, web-based videoconferencing, secure chat, and telephone. The physician can share notes with the patient, answer questions, suggest health assessments and articles, and if appropriate, diagnose or write prescriptions.



Background: Telehealth's Growing Momentum

When the visit concludes, payment is charged to the consumer's credit card and funds flow directly into the physician's bank account. Records are retained for future reference and can be passed on to other providers, as necessary, to support continuity of care. The experience resembles online services that have been well-established for years, from buying a book on Amazon.com to planning travel on Expedia.

Online Care also enables physicians to mirror the operations of their physical practices, online. For example, practice staff may gain access to the system in order to invite patients to register, schedule appointments for physicians, and interact with patients before or after encounters.

Online Care is being used by leading health companies across the country to deliver healthcare services to patients.

For years, stakeholders in the US healthcare system have discussed, debated, and attempted to predict the shape of impending reform. But reform's "arrival" has proven far from an ending. Instead, it has begun a transformation in which the only constant is indeed change. To cope with the need to improve outcomes, reduce cost – and retain sanity along the way – the medical community is confronting a herd of acronyms: EMRs, ACOs, PCMHs, and more. It may be time to turn the light on another sleeping elephant in the room: telehealth. Brushing the dust off this misunderstood (and often misused) technology may help physicians capitalize on the changes ahead, from the smallest community practice to the largest hospital network.

What is telehealth? According to the AAFP, telehealth is defined as "the use of advanced telecommunication technologies to exchange health information and provide health care services across geographic, time, social, and cultural barriers."¹ In other words, it harnesses technology to bring needed quality medical care into more places, more quickly, and to more patients in need. Closely associated with telemedicine, typical examples in the past have included provider-to-provider consultations through sophisticated video equipment; electronic transmission of still or dynamic images; and remote monitoring of vital signs.

Telehealth is far from a new idea. It dates back to the late 50s, when the University of Nebraska first used video communications via two-way, closed-circuit television to relay neurological images across campus to medical students. With dramatic advances in information technology and communications – including the advent of the Internet and broadband, high-speed connections – telehealth has recently become far more accessible, connecting physicians directly with the patients who need them (see Figure 1, "Telehealth Connects Doctors And Patients Through Technology"). The prison system has been one focal point. In Texas, for



Figure 1, "Telehealth Connects Doctors And Patients Through Technology"



example, almost 40,000 monthly visits now take place involving inmates in correctional facilities and remotely-located providers.² Meanwhile, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) delivered a variety of telehealth services to 300,000 patients in 2009 alone.³

An Effective Tool For Patient Care

A series of studies support the clinical efficacy of these efforts. Telehealth has demonstrated positive outcomes in a variety of specialties, including dermatology, cardiology, and behavioral health. In one trial published in *JAMA*, a combination of telecare management and remote monitoring significantly improved depression and pain in patients with cancer.⁴ Chronic care is also benefiting. A study of the VA's home telehealth program found that treating veterans with chronic conditions like diabetes, COPD, PTSD, depression, congestive heart failure, and hypertension reduced average hospital stays by 25% and admissions by 19%.⁵

Meanwhile, patient demand for telehealth services is growing. With 84% of Americans going online for activities like banking, shopping, and travel, there is an increasing desire to obtain healthcare services the same way.⁶ Manhattan Research estimates 80 million patients would like to have online visits with doctors.⁷ Another recent survey echoed this sentiment, with 78% open to "virtual doctor visits".⁸

Satisfaction is high among those patients who have experienced telehealth encounters. According to a recent survey across 168 studies, patients typically rated their telehealth visits greater than 4 on a 5-point scale. Another report found that 70% of patients preferred telemedicine options over traveling for in-person care.⁹ The Veterans Health Administration (VHA), too, reports a high patient satisfaction rating of 86%.¹⁰

Healthcare Reform Accelerates Change

All of the factors cited above have contributed to the steady growth of telehealth through the years. However, telehealth has too rarely crossed the divide from the halls of select major medical centers and into the Main Street settings where most physicians and patients reside. With the advent of healthcare reform, growing pressures are poised to change that:

- **Demand for medical services is outpacing supply.** An influx of new patients is taxing a system already at capacity, with 32 million Americans joining the ranks of the insured by 2014. This means many more knocks on the doors of physicians, with the Association of American Medical Colleges predicting a shortfall of as many as 150,000 in the next 15 years. The stress often falls on physicians themselves, with 76% at full capacity or feeling "overextended and overwhelmed."¹¹ Physicians need to somehow stretch their existing capacity, to more effectively provide care to growing patient needs.
- **More work comes with less reimbursement.** As they try to keep up, physicians are often inundated by administrative overhead as well as patient phone calls and emails, often for routine requests – and nearly always unpaid. A study by MGMA found that tasks associated with prescription refill phone calls alone cost a ten-physician practice an average of \$19,444 per year.¹² To survive, it is critical for physicians to be able to capture the fair value of their time and professional expertise.
- **Pressure is growing to reduce costs.** With more providers participating in Accountable Care contracts (through ACOs), compensation is beginning to reward outcomes rather than procedures – and shines a spotlight on controlling patient costs. Small wonder that 74% of physicians say they will change their practice operations in the next 1–3 years, according to a Physicians Foundation survey.¹³ Physicians are finding themselves needing to interact more frequently with patients, especially high-risk ones, in order to closely monitor their health and well-being.

Telehealth: Awakening The Elephant

With physicians in need of tools to navigate the changing healthcare landscape, telehealth is poised to finally realize its promise in the US medical mainstream. First, telehealth benefits the system as a whole by helping to balance the growing disconnect between supply of, and demand for, care – by enabling medical resources and expertise to be projected more efficiently. However, it also promises direct value for physicians and their practices in the following ways:



- **Creates opportunities for revenue generation.** By delivering care through structured technology, physicians can better monetize interactions with patients that now happen on the margins, including currently unpaid ones – such as phone calls and emails. Furthermore, the “anytime, anywhere” nature of telehealth enables the launch of new income-generating services.
- **Helps reduce costs while improving care.** By allowing patient-physician interactions to take place outside the walls of hospitals and offices, and in much shorter, more efficient timeframes, telehealth helps reduce the costs associated with traditional care delivery. Fragmented care delivery can be replaced with consistent, coordinated care – with patient compliance and outcomes improving as a result.
- **Improves the efficiency of practice operations.** Removing the barriers to scheduling, hours of operation, and modes of care delivery that exist with physical offices means that practices can operate more efficiently, without additional administrative burden. Physicians, too, can take advantage of connectivity to work more flexibly and increase options for their busy lifestyles.

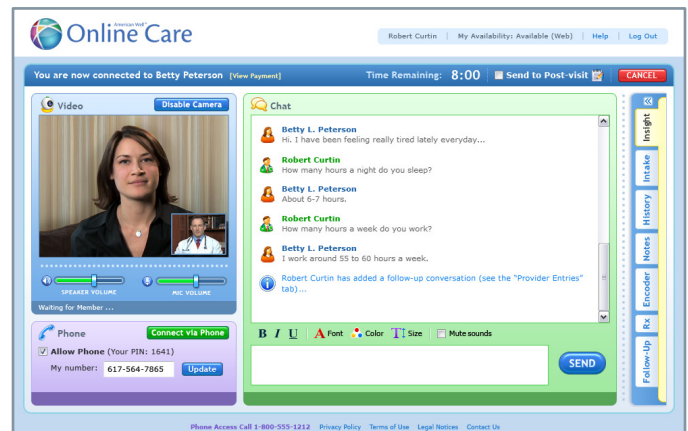


Figure 2, “The Physician-Patient Interaction”

Introducing Online Care for Providers

Physicians now have a new tool to realize the promise of telehealth services in their daily practices: Online Care. Online Care allows physicians to come together with patients for live, immediate encounters, using the Web or phone – at any time and from anywhere they choose (see Sidebar, “What Is Online Care?” and Figure 2, “The Physician-Patient Interaction”).

This interaction is centered around an online “virtual practice”, where physicians can provide care that takes advantage of the latest technologies, while also complementing the familiar processes of the physical office (see Figure 3, “The Online Practice Home Page”).



Figure 3, “The Online Practice Home Page”



With Online Care, physicians can realize value in several ways:

1) Open a new channel for revenue generation.

Online Care’s patent-protected technology provides an infrastructure for monetizing patient interactions, while also enabling the deployment of new services without corresponding infrastructure investments. Revenue opportunities take several forms:

• Convert routine encounters into income.

Physicians and practice staff may spend hours each day answering phone calls and returning emails – without charging for these services. Online Care allows physicians to shift these currently unpaid conversations to paid telehealth encounters. Physicians can decide how much they want to charge for an array of online encounters, from fee-based messages to phone calls and, of course, live, face-to-face conversations on the Web (see Figure 4, “Converting Routine Encounters Into Income”).



Figure 4, “Converting Routine Encounters Into Income”

• Conduct visits with patients who live far away.

To date, physicians have been able to provide care only to those patients who are easily available for an in-person visit. Online Care allows physicians to serve patients who are home-bound or outside of their current geography – to anywhere that can be reached by a phone or Internet connection. Physicians can open a new stream of revenue by providing much-needed services like second opinions to patients in distant locations.

• Practice concierge medicine. Many practices are beginning to offer concierge services to patients desiring an extra level of attention. But it can be difficult for physicians to know where or how to start. Online Care lets physicians begin charging for on-call and/or off-hours availability, whether they are in still in the office or at home.

• Extend new services to patients without hiring staff. Offering services to patients, such as nutritionists or weight loss counselors, has traditionally required a corresponding investment in resources, staff, and office space. With Online Care, physicians can make other types of providers available in their virtual practices and offer their services to patients, with no additional overhead (see Figure 5, “New Practice Services Without Additional Personnel”).



Figure 5, “New Practice Services Without Additional Personnel”

• Conduct virtual consults with PCPs and other caregivers. With demand outstripping supply for many specialties, time and geographical constraints have prevented specialists from seeing patients in need. Online Care allows specialists to leverage their much-needed expertise to PCP offices by offering live consults nationwide.

In support of these new revenue-generating services, Online Care assures complete automation of the payment process – meaning that physicians receive fees for services rendered immediately and directly. Patients logging on to Online Care must enter their credit or debit card information and are pre-authorized for the charge prior to any encounter. When the visit is complete, the patient’s card is



Figure 6, “Monitoring Patients At Risk With Telehealth”

charged, and funds flow directly into the designated bank account.

2) Control costs while improving care. Online Care helps keep care on track for the most involved patients, such as those under risk or with complex conditions, by providing a platform for ongoing monitoring and frequent interaction.

- **Manage patients under risk.** The care of medically complex patients currently involves time-consuming, repetitive and expensive visits to ensure care plans are followed. Compliance and ultimately outcomes can suffer as a result. Online Care offers physicians a better way to manage risk by extending care to patients in their homes as an alternative to in-person visits – especially beneficial to physicians entering Accountable Care contracts. Physicians can have shorter and more frequent points of contact with patients, while overcoming barriers to compliance such as mobility and geographic distance (see Figure 6, “Monitoring Patients At Risk With Telehealth”).
- **Reduce readmissions.** By remotely monitoring patients after they’ve left the hospital, Online Care allows physicians to prevent costly readmissions and improve post-visit care. For example, patients can be discharged after surgery and still be followed during virtual morning rounds.

3) Support practice operations and allow greater flexibility. Online Care reduces the administrative burdens of running a practice by letting care delivery happen when and where it is most appropriate for patients and physicians alike.

- **Increase flexibility and convenience.** Online Care lets physicians gain an unprecedented level of professional and personal flexibility by telecommuting. Physicians can practice whenever and wherever they are, during hours that work for their lives. This new freedom can resonate for physicians of all career stages, whether they are starting a family, nearing retirement, or simply wanting more control over their schedules.
- **Improve practice efficiency.** Waiting rooms are filled and phone lines occupied by patients with mundane or routine requests, like prescription refills or lab reviews. With Online Care, physicians can move these encounters online, ensuring that patients come to the office only when necessary. Tools like online appointment scheduling also free up front-office time.

Conclusion

From the halls of the White House to exam rooms around the country, most Americans now realize that their healthcare system is inexorably changing. Rules, processes, and terminology are all in flux. But what will not change, no matter what the acronym of the moment, is the core connection between doctors and the patients they care for.

It is for this reason that telehealth – which now uses ubiquitous technologies to facilitate this simple connection – is moving to the fore of physician practices. Telehealth is already breaking down barriers to needed care, while enabling providers to practice in a flexible, convenient manner – generating revenue along the way.

With the arrival of Online Care For Providers, the capabilities that were once the domain of a handful of select medical centers are no longer only concepts advocated in the State of the Union address. They are moving into the hands and homes of patients and providers across the nation.



Endnotes

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