

Telehealth: A Necessary Tool for the Future of US Healthcare

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The results of the Health Affairs study begin to paint a truly interesting picture within the Healthcare industry. The study has discovered that telehealth will probably not be cutting costs as advertised because it will increase utilisation and therefore healthcare spending. Telehealth will however help patients gain access to medical care and allow hospitals to lower their occupancy rates providing an opportunity to focus on more immediate medical emergencies. In 2014 the Becker's Hospital Review published an article describing a healthcare environment that continues to have higher inpatient volumes and increased emergency department admissions at hospitals.

Northwell Health has taken great strides in alleviating the increased emergency department admissions by implementing a telehealth application called the electronic intensive care unit program. It allows emergency specialists to remotely advise EMT's on proper patient care. The program has a special sub program called Telestroke that allows neurologists to quickly evaluate the patient as soon as they are in the hands of the emergency medical team, essentially saving valuable time and patients' lives. Northwell's recent partnership with Azivia means that they see a bright future for telehealth and expanding its use to home-care patients will allow them to use technologies like wearables, tablets, and other Bluetooth devices to monitor vitals, record symptoms, and eventually allow specialists to predict medical emergencies rather than react to them.

Introducing technologies like telehealth, medication adherence apps, wearables, mHealth, and even robotics, hospitals and doctors will bring their medical expertise into the homes of their patients. Why not bring the operating room to your home? We have all seen the amazing Da Vinci robot that can stitch a grape. We know that robotics can be controlled via the internet. This idea might be slightly outlandish given the current investment into telehealth but technology is headed in the right direction and with a \$1.7 Trillion healthcare market annual revenue the numbers make this future a bit more realistic.

The telehealth market is projected to grow 18.4% from its current \$17.8 billion by 2020 and patients will soon enjoy access to any doctor in the world! In my opinion, this could revolutionise the way patients take care of their health. Bringing hospitals and doctors to the home will create an environment where the healthcare industry can provide their medical services and expertise to an extended network with ease. Patients can be monitored and professionally consulted, more often than not, saving the patient and the trip to the hospital, something that some hospitals might be weary of.

If the occupancy rates continue declining, how will hospitals still profit? Hospitals will need to get with the program. Although telehealth may not be a huge cost cutting tool, it is definitely an instrument that provides hospitals with the capabilities to provide higher quality care and at the same time increase their potential market, eventually reaching global markets.

Recently, Mercy Health invested \$50 million into a 24/7, 300 physicians, nurses, specialists, researchers and support staff facility, that is estimated to deliver healthcare services to 3 million people in 5 years (limited by Medical State Licensing). The USA physicians have a big hurdle ahead of them regarding individual state licensing requirements; however, I'm a bit surprised that the healthcare industry professionals have not demanded a nationwide license. For telehealth to grow the state licensing restrictions must be revisited and a solution regarding the problems relating to telehealth policy must be developed.

Telehealth looks like the "Gold Mine" the Healthcare industry has been waiting for. Freeing the hospital's services from the confines of a hospital or ambulance. Telehealth has a role to play in transforming the relationship between doctors and patients from an isolated interactions/touch point mindset to a relationship mentality where value shifts from urgent need-based encounters to building a relationship from prevention and education through to lasting support.

The typical Doctor-Patient Relationship, as described in the article from the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health: "Whose doctor is it anyway?" which expresses one of the most critical problems inherent in managed care for the doctor-patient relationship. Patients correctly wonder if doctors are caring for them, the plan, or their own jobs or incomes (the latter is equally problematic in fee-for-service care)."

Now with telehealth everyone, especially in rural areas, can choose their doctor. He is just a simple video call away. Telehealth gives the hospitals and their doctors the opportunity to offer high quality care that focuses on patients, showing the patients that the hospital and doctor actually do care. It will take plenty of failures before telehealth finds its sweet spot, but it's a technology that will remove limitations within the industry, provide great opportunity for profits, and make a difference that saves lives.

Whether the industry is ready to fully commit to telehealth or not, the technology and the people's desire for accessible medical care, when it matters, will be the driving forces compelling hospitals' to develop a network of healthcare services that will reach a vaster network of patients and increase the quality of patient care. Healthcare costs might not be cut, but lives will be saved with telehealth. It is a medical lifeline that is available when you need it!

Original article can be found here:

http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/85fd63_222acd1041594f509e0de4934b8df622.pdf