

# Advancing Care Through Telehealth

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## Telehealth in Action: Helping a Family Through a Crisis

The day that baby Emily pulled a cup of scalding hot tea onto her lap was probably the worst in memory at the Smith household. The second degree burns she suffered required an in-patient hospital stay at a specialized pediatric burn unit. After discharge, she needed frequent follow-up visits with a plastic surgeon. With both parents

working, keeping Emily's every-other-day appointment schedule presented a significant challenge for the entire family.

Fortunately, Kaiser Permanente offered a novel solution: video visits that allowed digital images to be viewed remotely by the surgeon. "Having access to her specialist via video visit helped us enormously after the accident," said Emily's mother. Using their smart phones, the Smith family took pictures of the burns and emailed them to the physician just before the scheduled appointment time. During the appointment, the smart phone camera was used over a secure video connection to allow Emily's doctor to evaluate her in real-time. What once would have taken a few hours for each visit — including driving to the office — took only 10 minutes over the phone.

### WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- **Telehealth is a mode of health care delivery that involves virtual encounters between providers and patients.**
- **Telehealth offers patients greater convenience, access, and care continuity while supporting providers' use of evidence-based care protocols and improving care transitions.**
- **Telehealth is becoming increasingly common and Kaiser Permanente has employed it to improve care delivery in dermatology and other specialty areas.**
- **Policy changes at the federal and state levels are needed to enable telehealth to be offered more broadly.**

## Going Virtual

Telehealth technologies make it more convenient for patients to access health care services, removing barriers to receiving timely care and increasing patient engagement. These technologies can improve quality and lower costs through better management of patients' medical conditions.

Telehealth technologies and applications allow providers in a range of specialties to furnish care to patients in addition to face-to-face encounters. The American Telemedicine Association defines telehealth as “the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications to improve a patient’s clinical health status.”<sup>1</sup> The term telemedicine refers specifically to remote clinical services; telehealth is a broader concept that also encompasses remote non-clinical services (such as provider training), and provider-patient communication.<sup>2</sup>

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the federal agency that administers the Medicare Program, defines these services in three broad categories<sup>3</sup>:

- audio, visual or web-based technologies that allow two-way, real-time communication between patients and providers;
- asynchronous store-and-forward technology that transmits information from patients to providers or from one provider to another without requiring simultaneous engagement; and
- remote monitoring that allows providers to observe patients' chronic health conditions using equipment and telecommunication technology.

Telehealth is growing rapidly in the U.S. According to the American Telemedicine Association, over half of American hospitals now use some form of telemedicine, and nearly 1 million Americans use remote cardiac monitors. In 2011, the Veterans Health Administration conducted over 300,000 remote consultations using telehealth technologies.<sup>4</sup>

## Kaiser Permanente Advances Telehealth

In 2012, nearly 50 percent of contacts between patients and primary care providers at Kaiser Permanente took place over the phone or through secure emails. These are appointments that have supplemented face-to-face visits and have largely been preferred for patients and providers alike. We currently have remote primary care, neurology, virtual inpatient rounding, mental health, and dermatology programs in various stages of implementation.



Our teledermatology pilot programs are used to supplement existing services by enabling patients to receive care anywhere, anytime. In some areas, patients connect to providers directly from home; other areas are testing real-time dermatology consults during primary care visits. Meanwhile, patients continue to have access to high quality in-person services. The goal is to identify the most effective approaches

and make them universally available.

### Early Findings from KP Teledermatology Programs

Early evidence suggest high satisfaction on the part of both patients and providers. In Colorado, for example, nearly 80 percent of patients who participated in a teledermatology video visit were likely to recommend it to others and two out of three reported not needing an in-person follow up visit because their issue had been resolved.<sup>7,8</sup> Physicians are also satisfied with the service, reporting that it allowed them to allocate office time to the patients who most needed to be seen in person.<sup>9</sup>

### Broadening Access to Telehealth Services

Legal and regulatory barriers limit the way telehealth can be used. At the federal level, Medicare's traditional fee-for-service program pays providers for care furnished using telehealth technologies only in limited circumstances in rural areas. Medicare Advantage plans (such as those offered by Kaiser Permanente), may provide telehealth services but must categorize them as "extra services," which means that there is less funding for other benefits or premium reductions for members. Several coalitions, including the Coordinated Care Coalition and the America Telehealth Association, have formed to influence policymakers to expand the use of remote access technologies in Medicare, and the Congress is considering several changes. In addition, a recent inquiry by the Senate Finance Committee garnered numerous responses emphasizing the role of telehealth technologies in improving chronic care condition management for Medicare beneficiaries.

### A Movement to Expand Telehealth across State Lines

Insurers offering coverage to businesses and individuals are bound by fewer restrictions and may cover telehealth services as long as they follow applicable federal and state laws. Consequently, services such as teledermatology have become

more advanced; yet, licensure laws limit the use of telehealth technology across state lines by barring physicians and other providers from providing services to people in other states. The Federation of State Medical Boards has introduced an Interstate Licensure Compact that creates a new licensing option under which qualified physicians seeking to practice in multiple states could obtain expedited licensure in all states



participating in the Compact. This would allow physicians to provide telehealth services to patients across state lines, and could set the stage for broadening access in new ways as the technology advances.

\* Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals involved.

- 1 American Telemedicine Association. <http://www.americantelemed.org/about-telemedicine/what-is-telemedicine>
- 2 <http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/faqs/what-telehealth-how-telehealth-different-telemedicine>
- 3 Part B, 42 CFR 410.78, Part B, 42 CFR 410.78, Part C, Medicare Managed Care Manual, Ch.4, Is/faqs/whaPart C, Medicare Managed Care Manual, Ch.4, §30.3.
- 4 [http://www.americantelemed.org/about-telemedicine/faqs#.VRQ\\_rY7z6vk](http://www.americantelemed.org/about-telemedicine/faqs#.VRQ_rY7z6vk)
- 5 Garrido, Terhilda. "Transforming Care Delivery Using HIT – Health Information Technology," Kaiser Permanente International, April 2014.
- 6 KPCO Market Research, August 2014
- 7 KPCO Market Research, August 2014
- 8 Goldberg, Kenny. "Kaiser Embraces Telemedicine to Improve Access to Dermatology." KPBS Public Broadcasting. March 2014.

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