

Checklist

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Telehealth Program Checklist



**National
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Health®**

NATIONAL
COMMITTEE ON
**Evidence-Based
Benefit Design**

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a marked expansion in the creation and adoption of telehealth programs, which deliver health care services through telecommunications and web-based technologies. This expansion of telehealth can be attributed to a number of drivers:

- Continuous development of telecommunications and a growing comfort with health technology;
- High demand in rural and remote areas where there are physician shortages;
- A consistent need for enhanced quality services;
- High prevalence of chronic diseases; and
- A growing elderly population that demands delivery of improved products with greater patient satisfaction.¹

Telehealth Utilization

According to a Towers Watson survey, 37% of large employers are expected to offer telemedicine in 2015, contributing to a 68% increase from 2014. This same survey revealed that another 34% of employers will be considering such offerings by 2016 or 2017, suggestive of a trend that will likely continue to increase. Vendors have indicated that the per-member utilization of these services hovers around 10%.² Engagement with this service may change, however, as telehealth continues to gain momentum.

What is Telehealth?

According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), telehealth is “the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support long-distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, public health and health administration.” Examples of telehealth include the use of videoconferencing by specialists to conduct consultations with new patients, the transmission of diagnostic imaging from one physician to another to obtain a second opinion, the use of devices to capture clinical data to allow for remote patient monitoring, and the use of the Internet by patients to obtain health information or provide peer support.

Source: Health Resources and Services Administration. Telehealth. <http://www.hrsa.gov/ruralhealth/about/telehealth/>. Accessed February 16, 2015.

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Telehealth Capabilities/Functionalities

Telehealth programs allow patients to conduct virtual visits at home or on the go with a physician or nurse using a personal computer, tablet, mobile device, or kiosk located in an office or retail setting. A number of health plans and third-party vendors now offer telehealth programs, although the scope of services, capabilities, integration, functionality, and cost vary.

Currently, telehealth programs largely focus on the diagnosis and treatment of acute, non-urgent health issues, such as sinusitis, conjunctivitis, and the flu. Much like convenience-care clinics, telehealth programs meet an important, unfilled need for nonemergency health care services that are easily accessible, lower in cost than urgent-care centers or emergency rooms, and available during hours when many physicians' offices are closed. Programs are increasingly evolving, however, to address chronic care, as well as mental, behavioral, and dietary needs.

The potential benefits of telehealth are numerous and include:

- Reduced travel time to and from the doctor
- Reduced wait times to see a doctor
- Reductions in inappropriate emergency-room and urgent-care use
- Reductions in absenteeism
- Reductions in presenteeism
- Lower per-episode treatment costs
- Employee satisfaction

Cost and Quality Considerations

A study of one telehealth program, appearing in the journal *Health Affairs*, found that online visits saved a patient, on average, 2.5 hours per visit when compared to standard in-person visits.³ The same study revealed that per-episode treatment costs averaged \$88.03 lower for telehealth-treated episodes of care, compared with cost of care that is received in traditional settings, such as emergency rooms. It has been predicted that telehealth could save U.S. employers \$6 billion collectively.² Additionally, early adopters of telehealth report that, from an employee engagement perspective, these programs are a highly-valued offering.⁴

Despite the exciting potential of telehealth programs, employers must be just as diligent in making decisions about how to implement or promote them as they are in making all other health-benefit decisions. Because telehealth programs are still relatively new, limited research is available on the quality of care and adherence to evidence-based protocols. Furthermore, if appropriate-care continuity measures are not in place, the use of these programs could lead to care fragmentation, a large problem in the U.S. that has yet to be adequately addressed by the health care industry.

Nevertheless, initial studies of these programs show the promise of quality care. A 2013 study of one telehealth vendor produced a finding that may point to the clinical effectiveness of online care: Patients who received care online were less likely to seek a follow-up visit, compared to those who sought treatment in

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traditional care settings for a similar condition.⁵ Another telehealth program similarly demonstrated high-episode resolution rates (89%-95%) for treatment of its highest-volume conditions (acute sinusitis, conjunctivitis, and lower-genitourinary system infections).³

An additional quality concern surrounding telehealth utilization, is the potential for the overprescribing of antibiotics. A 2013 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that, in comparison to in-person visits, e-visits were characterized by significantly higher antibiotic prescribing rates.⁶ One telehealth vendor, however, was able to demonstrate, through claims analysis (2010-2012), an extremely high rate of appropriate prescribing behavior in the virtual setting.³ This finding was based on the avoidance of antibiotics for treatment of acute bronchitis. According to the study, antibiotics were appropriately avoided in 81 of the 86 acute bronchitis cases that presented for treatment online, resulting in a 94.2% rate of effective prescribing behavior.

Additional Considerations for Employers

There are a number of other factors that employers must weigh in determining whether telehealth is something they want to pursue for their members. These include:

- The needs of the employee and dependent population in terms of health care accessibility (e.g., Are there a significant number of employees living in rural areas that could benefit from increased access to care?)
- The goals for the program (e.g., Cutting back on inappropriate emergency room use, decreasing absenteeism, etc.)
- Potential employee interest and uptake of telehealth services (e.g., Is your employee population well suited for, or likely interested in, these types of services?)
- The cost of the service to employees (e.g., Do the potential savings outweigh the risks?)
- The cost and time necessary to implement and monitor the program (e.g., Are there other priorities that would preclude using resources to develop a telehealth program?)⁷

Once an employer has made the decision to adopt telehealth, selecting the appropriate vendor becomes the next vital step.

The National Business Group on Health developed this Telehealth Program Checklist to help employers and their consultants select and manage a telehealth program that is right for them. The Business Group will update and improve the Checklist as new information becomes available. Please contact us at solutions@businessgrouphealth.org to provide your input.

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Telehealth Checklist

The material included below is intended to help you assess vendor-service offerings, care-continuity measures, user experience, functionality, program quality and cost, and information around plan sponsor service and reporting. Use this checklist when evaluating a telehealth program.

Services	Yes	No	Description
Offers access to U.S. board-certified physicians, nurse practitioners or physician assistants licensed to practice in your state of residence. Specify number and type of clinicians available.			
Diagnoses and treats common acute conditions. Specify number and type of acute health conditions addressed.			
Provides ongoing support for chronic disease management. Specify number and type of chronic health conditions addressed.			
Available to children under age 18.			
Program can be customized to include only certain specialties or services.			
Protocols are in place to assess online visit appropriateness. Specify protocols.			
Procedures are in place to help patients obtain in-person care if their condition is not appropriate for online care (e.g., emergency situations). Specify procedures.			
Pathways are in place to connect/refer those patients without a primary care physician to a local in-network PCP or a patient-centered medical home for standard follow-up (follow-up visit required in some states).			
Measures are in place to promote adherence to evidence-based guidelines. Specify these measures as well as monitoring procedures that are in place to ensure that providers are consistently following evidence-based protocols.			
Clinicians are able to write prescriptions and send them to a pharmacy convenient to the patient. Specify types of prescriptions clinicians are able to write. Specify limitations that may be in place in regard to prescribing controlled substances.			

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Services	Yes	No	Description
Offers nutrition programs. Registered dietitians are available for online coaching/consult.			
Offers behavioral-health programs. Licensed social workers/psychologists are available for online consult.			
Offers services such as specialist referrals, biometric assessments and ability to obtain lab results. Specify services.			
CARE CONTINUITY			
Accurate and thorough medical history is gathered prior to consultation in order to ensure appropriate treatment and to avoid possible contraindications from existing prescriptions. Specify how medical history is collected.			
Program allows for patients to easily seek follow-up care or information from the physician (or physician's designee) who conducts the virtual-health visit.			
Provides patients with a detailed record of the consultation that can be shared with their personal physician and health plan in either electronic or paper format. Offers insight upfront regarding how this information is shared between parties (e.g., fax, direct EMR link, etc.).			
Provides patients with access to a complete, ongoing medical record of all past telehealth consultations, including patient-physician communications, exam/lab results, prescriptions, etc.			
Program clinicians will participate in peer-to-peer conversations with the patient's regular provider if necessary.			
Provides personalized patient alerts, such as when a prescription is ready to be picked up. Specify types of patient alerts.			
Conducts follow-up calls or emails with patients after consultations. Specify method of follow-up and length of time between consultation and follow-up. Specify what standardized questions are asked at these follow-up calls and what process exists for determining next steps if the patient is not improving.			

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Services	Yes	No	Description
USER EXPERIENCE			
Informs patients of any risks/advantages that come with using telehealth, and requires informed consent from patients with option to provide the consent electronically.			
Allows patients to select their own in-network physicians based on needs and preferences. Specify if patients are able to choose a clinician based on specialty, gender, language, practice proximity and network status.			
Includes clinician-specific, quality-information/review data that the patient will have access to prior to the online visit.			
Conducts routine patient-satisfaction surveys built around various types of metrics.			
Provides insight into key metrics such as average wait time, average length of consultation for various types of encounters (should allow for at least 10 mins.), average resolution time, member satisfaction, etc.			
Provides capability for consultations to be securely conducted via telephone.			
Provides capability for consultations to be securely conducted through any device with a front-facing camera (computer, smartphone, tablet, etc.).			
Provides capability for consultations to be conducted through an online chat.			
Provides capability for consultations to be conducted through an online questionnaire.			
Compatible with multiple technology platforms (e.g., iOS, Android, Windows, etc.).			
Meets the user-experience standards of popular consumer mobile apps and websites (i.e., user-friendly, simple, no additional training required).			
Patients are able to sign on to the program from the company home page.			

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Services	Yes	No	Description
Password-protected, personalized portal.			
Multilingual capabilities. Specify which languages are offered.			
Offers customer-service team to support and resolve patient inquiries, technical issues, complaints, etc.			
Offers supporting communication tools to enable appropriate member education and engagement with the program to increase overall utilization.			
FUNCTIONALITY			
Requires providers to undergo periodic training to deliver care effectively in an online setting.			
Uses privacy and security best practices and is HIPAA-compliant.			
Program is available nationwide. Specify if only available in certain states or whether there may be service, coverage or usage restrictions that vary by state.			
Requires patients to download specific browsers and software, or to have specific hardware such as webcams.			
Patients are able to synchronize smartphone apps (i.e., Apple Health) with the vendor program, allowing for easy sharing of data (e.g., biometrics, vitals, prescription data, medical history, past visits, etc.) with telehealth providers.			
Provides routine call monitoring for quality assurance.			
Capability to record/store the video-visit encounters.			
Data management/disaster recovery protocols are in place.			

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Services	Yes	No	Description
QUALITY			
Offers details about how clinicians are selected and credentialed.			
Specify the percentage of clinicians selected to participate in the telehealth program out of the total number who apply to work with the program.			
Process in place to review the quality of care provided by physicians to patients (e.g., peer review of physicians). Describe the process, and specify how often physicians are evaluated for quality.			
Shares details about the breadth and depth of the physician team, and offers insights into provider-network management (e.g., how the vendor manages demand, ability to integrate with local provider practices, etc.).			
Specify the frequency and process for monitoring sanctions and license revocations.			
Capability of the employer to select, based on quality, a narrowed pool of clinicians to serve their employee population.			
COST			
Specify cost of the program to plan members.			
Specify cost of the program to plan sponsor, including any applicable health-plan fees and/or commissions to brokers and consultants.			
Online visits are submitted as claims.			
Vendor specifies whether it will take eligibility files straight from the claims administrator or whether it will require its own.			
Vendor will be able to differentiate between patients in a PPO vs. those enrolled in a consumer-directed health plan (CDHP) (before and/or after deductible), using the eligibility file.			
Specify whether employers are required to complete a nondisclosure agreement with the vendor and the claims administrator.			

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Services	Yes	No	Description
PLAN SPONSOR SERVICE AND REPORTING			
Provides monthly utilization report, including number of consultations, wait times for patients, diagnoses rendered by condition type, number of prescriptions written by drug class as well as by diagnosis, and number of generic and brand prescriptions written.			
Provides annual utilization report, including number of consultations, wait times for patients, diagnoses rendered by condition type, number and type of prescriptions written by drug class as well as by diagnosis, number of generic and brand prescriptions written, savings analysis for the consumer and employer, and patient satisfaction scores.			
Offers reporting on cost based on what alternative treatments would have been received or other measures of ROI/VOI (e.g. increased productivity).			
Regular reporting on clinical quality based on internal auditing, peer review of cases, and completion of physician training specific to telemedicine.			
Regular reporting on unfiltered feedback from patients regarding the service.			
Describe any performance guarantees.			
Describe ideas about how to continually improve consumer interface and the online experience.			
Describe any additional services and reports.			

Conclusion

Telehealth services are a rapidly growing and expanding capability with the potential to improve cost and quality. Employers should evaluate the various functionalities and benefits of certain telehealth vendors to identify the best fit for their program, including potential for future enhancements and ability to drive utilization.

Resources

- National Business Group on Health Position Statement on Telehealth
- State and Federal Policy Recommendations to Promote Telehealth
- Bringing Health Care to Employees Anywhere, Anytime Using Telehealth
- What Your CEO is Reading- Telehealth
- Telehealth Presentation by Oracle and American WellHealth Plan Telehealth Solutions Summary
- How to Engage a Workforce in Telehealth
- The Doctor Will Email You Now

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About the Institute on Health Care Costs and Solutions

The Institute on Health Care Costs and Solutions, an initiative of the National Business Group on Health, was established in November 2001. Its mission is to provide an intense focus on finding effective solutions to the high cost of health care benefits confronting large employers.

About the National Business Group on Health®

The Business Group is the only non-profit organization devoted exclusively to representing large employers' perspectives on national health issues and providing solutions to its members' most important health care and health benefits challenges. The Business Group fosters the development of a safe health care delivery system and treatments based on scientific evidence. Members share strategies for controlling costs, improving patient safety and quality of care, increasing productivity and supporting healthy lifestyles.

Additional copies of this Checklist are available at www.businessgrouphealth.org or by contacting solutions@businessgrouphealth.org.

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