



TOPICS IN THE NEWS: TELEHEALTH

INTRODUCTION

There has been frequent reference to telehealth in the media recently. The COVID-19 pandemic has logically led to drastic increases in the use of this remote access to health care providers, but it has actually been around for the better part of the 21st Century. Teladoc, the country's first and largest telehealth company was founded in 2002, and served its first patients in 2005, providing access via mobile device, computer, and telephone. Spreading in tandem with the prevalence of cellphones, the percentage of hospitals using some degree of telehealth grew from 35% in 2010 to 76% in 2017, and by 2016 the American Medical Association recommended that all medical students receive training to provide care via telehealth. Even as in recent years use had jumped – the first 9 months of 2019 saw a 64% increase over the 3 million visits made in same period of 2018, the current figures are astounding. Prior to March 2020, Henry Ford Health Systems averaged ~150 telehealth visits per week. Since then, they have handled over 6,000 visits over just a single week.

The Federal Health Resources and Services Administration defines telehealth as “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.” Telehealth services are delivered in a variety of ways: real-time communication, store-and-forward, remote patient monitoring and mobile health (mHealth). (NCSL *LegisBrief*, v28 n5, February 2020).

PROS & CONS

PROS:

- Addresses the physician shortage by extending the reach of the existing medical corps into remote and otherwise underserved areas
- Reduces the cost of healthcare in a variety of ways: limits the burden of lost work time, transportation and childcare associated with office visits. For a number of health concerns, it provides ready care at a lower cost than expensive emergency room visits, and in Michigan, insurance companies have been early to embrace telehealth expenses.
- Allows, in some instances, providers to consult with each other, which can build the depth of coverage in rural areas
- Aligns with current consumer proclivities and preferences.

CONS:

- Can diminish the continuity of care, turning primary care services into a series of discreet events rather than a continuum of comprehensive primary care
- Too much, too soon, for some doctors, already adapting to online medical records and online prescribing protocols
- HIPAA-compliant technology can be clunky, and in general can be hard for the technology-challenged, such as the elderly and the poor.
- It can be impersonal, and limited by lack of physical examinations, and procedures such as X-rays and EKGs still require office visits

DIG DEEPER INTO THIS TOPIC

It is one getting a lot of coverage these days, so your research options are vast. Here are some targeted resources, to help you get started.

- [Center for Connected Health Policy National Telehealth Policy Resource Center](#)
Updated information on telehealth policies across the country. Analyses of federal legislation. Reports and policies briefs COVID-19 related state actions.
- [Tapping Into Telehealth to Expand Care](#) (*LegisBrief*, v28 n5, February 2020)
Uncanny with its timing, just prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States, this report provides an overview of telehealth, and points to previous, more in depth coverage.
- [The Health Care Industry: Can new models improve care and lower costs?](#) (CQ Researcher, March 27, 2020)
Includes a detailed section on telehealth.
- [Virtual Health Care in the Era of Covid-19](#) (*The Lancet*, v395, n10231, April 11, 2020)
A look at the implementation of telehealth in other parts of the world
- [National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers](#)
12 regional and 2 national Telehealth Resource Centers, established to provide assistance, education, and information to organizations and individuals who are actively providing or interested in providing health care at a distance.
- Track what other states are doing! Our Law Library staff can search digital legal resources for you to explore telehealth laws and bills in other states. Email lmlawlib@michigan.gov to request assistance.

CAVEAT:

It is hard to assess the reliability of the links provided in this report, given the current telework conditions. Please email librarian@michigan.gov for copies of the materials referenced here if access is restricted.