

## Expert Opinion

# What's next for telehealth?



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By Jonathan Salon, President, MDLIVE

To effectively connect with people who have traditionally encountered barriers to health care, providers should focus on high-quality virtual office visits, creating a seamless technology experience, and utilizing data collection initiatives.

Telehealth, AKA virtual care, was a convenience play for a long time—a quick and easy way for consumers to get care for sore throats, sinus infections, the flu, pink eye, and other common, low acuity conditions. During the pandemic, it became a lifeline for many people as the only safe option for getting the care they needed. Imagine something as important as a prescription refill for a patient managing a chronic condition: many of those patients would have had nowhere to turn during the height of the pandemic had it not been for telehealth.

Recognizing the convenience and safety it offered, consumers continued to use virtual care even as in-person care became available again. Virtual care visits **accounted for 5%** of all claims for visits conducted with health care providers in the U.S. in April 2021, compared to less than 0.2% in April 2019.

Two years following the onset of the pandemic, virtual care has become a highly acceptable—even preferred, in some cases—option for accessing care. Seventy-five percent of consumers polled for the Evernorth **2022 Health Care in Focus** (HCIF) report agreed that more care will be provided virtually in the future, and 61% reported an intent to use virtual care and other digital health apps for at least some of their health care needs. With widespread openness to using and adoption among consumers, what's next for telehealth?

## SHIFTING TO LONGITUDINAL CARE

It is clear the door has swung wide open for telehealth to shift from its roots in delivering episodic care for low acuity conditions to delivering longitudinal, whole-person care – something telehealth providers propelled forward the past two years with the introduction of virtual primary care and a focus on expanding behavioral health services.

A 2021 study conducted by national virtual care provider MDLIVE showed 61% of consumers were open to using virtual care for routine care needs, such as annual checkups, specialist referrals, and medication management, while 55% indicated they are open to using virtual care for behavioral health services.

Closing gaps in routine **preventive care** is a cornerstone strategy in health care when it comes to supporting patients, improving patient outcomes, and reducing costs for payors and patients. Additionally, primary care physicians (PCPs) have proven to be an important conduit for connecting patients struggling with mental health issues to behavioral health services.

However, more than one in three adults under age 50 does not have a primary care provider, and it's estimated that **150 million adults** skip or forgo an annual check-up. Data from MDLIVE shows 70% of patients who completed a preventive care visit with an MDLIVE physician had no primary care visit in the previous 24 months, and fewer than 25% of those patients reported having a local primary care provider. Sixty-eight percent of that same group were found to have at least one chronic disease.

Many of the persistent barriers to regular primary care visits have little to do with the care itself and far more to do with issues of convenience, access, and cost, even for individuals who do have PCPs. Virtual primary care gives people an entry point to the health care system – most notably, preventive care services – by removing many of those barriers.

## AN INTEGRAL ROLE IN HEALTH CARE DELIVERY

Today, there are significant challenges with care delivery that have a real impact on whether people seek necessary care and their experience when they do. Health plans and sponsors are struggling to find new ways to improve quality of care, outcomes, and patient experience while expanding options for accessing medical and behavioral health care and other related support – all while keeping health care affordable for their members and employees.

Telehealth can be used for a variety of purposes, such as urgent care or triage for emergent conditions, medication refills and management, follow-up touchpoints for surgery and other medical procedures, and chronic care management. In fact, MDLIVE's consumer research shows more than 50% indicated they would be open to using it for help managing a chronic condition.

Additionally, patients report high levels of satisfaction with their virtual care experiences. According to a recent McKinsey study, 55% of patients said they were more satisfied with telehealth/virtual care visits than with in-person appointments.

Virtual care cannot and should not replace in-person care completely, but there is growing evidence that the two work better together and consumers want an integrated model that provides options for both. Offering virtual care options to patients presents an opportunity to improve outcomes by offering timely care to those who might otherwise delay it due to time and other constraints while also improving access for individuals who live in areas where provider availability is a challenge.

And for patients who have strong PCP relationships, telehealth can play a complementary role in their care, especially for older patients and patients who need support managing chronic medical or mental health conditions.

## FUELING THE SUCCESS OF VALUE-BASED CARE MODELS

It's well documented that **value-based care** and risk-based models, which reward providers for quality, are replacing fee-for-service models which reimburse based on the quantity of services. Value-based care performance measures include a combination of efficiency measures (such as ER visit rate and referrals to high-performing providers), clinical quality metrics, and patient satisfaction.

When executed well, value-based care has proven to lower the overall cost of care while improving clinical quality and patient satisfaction, and because telehealth has proven to lower cost of care, it will play an important role in a successful shift toward value-based care models.

With simple health plan integrations, virtual primary care providers can be equipped with the data and information they need to make referrals to high-performing specialists and preferred labs while ensuring they are prescribing the most cost-effective drug therapies and pharmacy options based on

plan design and the benefits available to the patient. One analysis suggests health plans and sponsors can **save an average of \$200** on a routine care visit through these types of efficiencies.

Additionally, telehealth and other digital health tools provide the ability to help identify and engage populations for whom ongoing monitoring and dialogue is most needed, including individuals with multiple chronic conditions, those who could benefit from behavioral health services, and those negatively affected by social determinants of health (SDoH). They also can improve communication between providers and patients, which in turn, can boost patient satisfaction and improve outcomes.

The bottom line for health plans and sponsors is that telehealth has become an essential component of any care delivery program and integral to offsetting rising health care costs, improving patient outcomes, and increasing member and employee satisfaction.



As President of MDLIVE, Jonathan Salon provides strategic and operational leadership, leads day-to-day business operations, and oversees the MDLIVE leadership team and MDLIVE critical enterprise support partners. Jonathan brings 25 years of experience in a broad range of areas, including go-to-market strategy, investment management, operations, finance, and legal.