digital health

telehealth in the time of COVID-19

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Myth vs. Fact?

"You need to be HANDS-ON to provide any patient care!"

Although hands-on assessment is ideal, there is still a lot we can do through telehealth, especially in a time of crisis.

What is Telehealth?

Telehealth is defined as using any form of telecommunication to provide clinical or non-clinical health care services. Most individuals think of telehealth as a method of using live video chat with their providers. However, telehealth can also include communication through smartphones or tablets via audio or messaging. Telehealth can also refer to remote patient monitoring, where patients wear a device that measures vitals that are sent back to the provider's office for evaluation. Telehealth can also refer to using long-range tools to perform procedures, such as tele-surgery.

Uses of Telehealth During COVID-19

The circumstances around telehealth have drastically changed during the COVID-19 pandemic which is catalyzing broader utility and integration of these services. For example, the HHS (2020) has temporarily removed some of the limitations of HIPAA to prevent any barrier of telehealth-use during this public health emergency. Healthcare organizations are trying to find the balance between testing and treating COVID-19 patients with caring for their existing patients with chronic conditions.

In the current pandemic, we are faced with a highly contagious virus known as the SARS-CoV-2, and the safety of patients and healthcare teams are of utmost importance. There are several challenges that we're facing because of the insufficient PPE and staffing. Telehealth services are one of the solutions we can use to prevent unnecessary risk of exposure during a time where shelter-in-place can help flatten the curve, protecting providers, patients, families, and caregivers. Although there are limitations to telehealth, for the most part chronic condition management and COVID-19 triaging can be completed without the need for hands-on assessment.
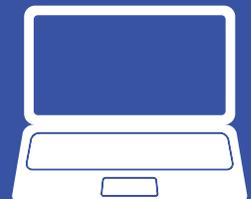
Pharmacy and Technology

Pharmacies are one of the essential businesses that remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic and are able to leverage different forms of technology to continue to provide patient care.

Some pharmacies are using telepharmacy services to provide remote verification of medications. This allows a portion of the pharmacy staff to remotely review medication orders and verify them for dispensing, reducing their potential exposure to COVID-19. In addition, this helps with expansion of pharmacy services in rural areas and those highly affected by COVID-19.

Pharmacists are also integrating digital health products to extend the reach of care and augment the patient experience. Digital health encompasses a wide range of products at the intersection of health and technology for the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and management of health and diseases. These products can help identify gaps in care where a pharmacist intervention may potentially benefit the patient.

Telehealth services, a form of digital health, enable pharmacists to remain connected with their patients. Pharmacists are specially trained to provide a variety of services and interact with patients daily, forming a level of comfort and bond with their patients. Telehealth provides the tools necessary to allow pharmacists to maintain their bond with the patient through virtual care visits, extending their reach and allowing them to continue to provide services such as MTM and chronic disease management.

The Future

We're in uncertain times, and we made an oath to devote our professional life to the service of all humankind. This means being innovative with how we provide patient care. Telehealth has quickly emerged as a viable solution. As we navigate through this pandemic, we'll come out the other side with lessons learned to be better providers for all.

Reference

HHS Office for Civil Rights. (2020, March 17). *Notification of Enforcement Discretion for Telehealth* [Text]. HHS.Gov. https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/special-topics/emergency-preparedness/notification-enforcement-discretion-telehealth/index.html

About the Author

Tony Dao, PharmD, CPHIMS is a pharmacy informatics specialist for CHOC Children's and co-founder of the Pharmacy Informatics Academy. He received his pharmacy degree from USC School of Pharmacy in 2012 and worked on the EHR build and implementation at Ventura County Healthcare Agency, remaining there for multiple projects until 2017. He started the first pharmacy informatics podcast in 2019, Pharmacy, IT, & Me, as a means to educate students and pharmacists on the ever-evolving field. He has been a past president and Pharmacist of the Year of the Orange County Pharmacists Association and is a current Editorial Advisory Board member of Pharmacy Times and a member of the ASHP Section of Pharmacy Informatics and Technology.

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