



VIRTUAL CARE REVISITED

The Rise of Telehealth in a post-COVID world

Telehealth and Telemedicine have been around for many years. However, during the early days of 2020, with the onslaught of the global pandemic, healthcare organizations quickly found themselves reviewing and revamping their virtual care strategies.

In November 2020, Kingsley Gate Partners convened a Life Sciences and Healthcare Galaxy of Leaders virtual event to discuss the ongoing evolution of Virtual Care in a post-COVID world.

We were most fortunate to be joined by a panel of industry experts to discuss the increasing use of virtual care during COVID-19.

The participants included physicians and administrative leaders in health systems and health technology companies, CEOs and senior executives of private equity and venture capital-backed healthcare services organizations, and investors from across the Life Sciences and Healthcare Services industries.



The New World of Telehealth and Telemedicine

How has the global pandemic impacted the use of telehealth and telemedicine across the healthcare industry?

Telehealth strategies and innovations in virtual care have existed in many settings for years. However, given the global pandemic, suddenly hundreds of millions of people could no longer freely leave their homes. And with that, virtual care, in all its forms, has been thrust into the spotlight.

That said, different types of organizations offered different types of solutions. The VP and Head of Innovation of a large, multi-state hospital system shared that they are primarily using virtual care to provide virtual access to physician specialists across a larger geography, especially in rural areas.

But how is the patient population reacting to the new realities?

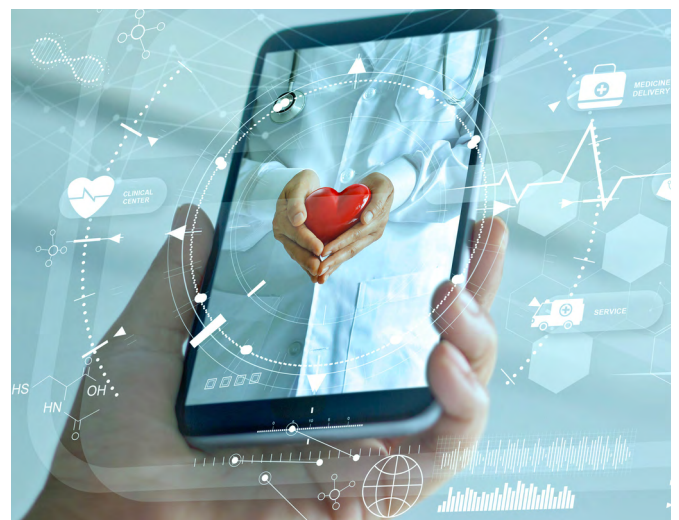
There has been a dramatic increase in patient perception of care/patient satisfaction through virtual care strategies. Even when the strategies are not directly visible to the patient, results ensue.

In a few highlighted cases, access has been improved using providers to facilitate consultations versus in-person visits. For certain specialties, the ability to see more patients virtually improves care for all. The pandemic shined a light on how well these arrangements can work—a real win when populations are dispersed across a geography.

One panelist remarked **“What we call Virtual Care is essentially being delivered by technology organizations via technology platforms. For Virtual care to be successful, healthcare providers need to be the ones who jump into make it actually happen.”**

This requires provider willingness to adopt new methodologies and training to ensure that the comfort level is increased so that care can be delivered in the most ideal ways.

“Patient satisfaction has vastly improved with the increase in virtual care,” commented another panelist making a strong case for the new patient-first strategies that appeal to the hearts of clinicians.





Technology as a Solution

How has technology innovation been implemented, if at all, in advancing new virtual care strategies?

The Executive Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of a large health system pointed out, “As providers, it’s all about value-based care. As we look at putting technology in an organization, the question we need to ask is, how does it alter outcomes for our patients? Sure, technology might just solve all the problems, but where does it fit in the organization’s business model?”

Many of our panelists stressed the importance of first asking what the desired outcome is of any technological advance.

As one leader rightly shared **“We tend to prescribe technology before correctly diagnosing the problem we have at hand.”**

He further described the two-pronged approach to incorporating technology. “There are two things we must keep in mind: one, the benefit of the technology and two, understanding the design of the technology that works best. But what I don’t think we are that good at as an industry is measuring people and the context of what is important to them.”

The discussion concluded with a focus on the importance of not innovating solely for innovations sake. “Fundamentally we have to drive change in how we learn before we design. The circumstance and the constant needs to be understood to make the world better for the patient and the provider,” added a senior executive panelist concurrently highlighting one of the unintended outcomes of the pandemic—the

speed at which alternatives are being explored and implemented.

COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on nursing homes and assisted living facilities. What solutions can Virtual Care prescribe?

We had three participants who currently lead organizations serving the elderly—either in nursing homes or with in-home services. As has been well documented, this segment of the population continues to be adversely impacted by COVID-19.

Our panelists confirmed that while it was initially quite challenging, there are many opportunities available to lead technology and innovative care delivery models. “In nursing homes especially, the benefits of technology had been underestimated in terms of what is possible,” commented a physician CEO and panelist at the discussion. His statement was further corroborated by a senior executive who said, “During the pandemic, technology has helped bring forward some of the most innovative interventions within the staff at nursing homes and the external clinicians. We see improving results in how medical directors are now able to offer better care for their patients.”

Advancements in the virtual care segment of healthcare have opened the doors to questions around the necessity of going back to the way things were—given the efficiency associated with virtual care and the partnership between the clinicians and nursing homes.

Linking back to the earlier comments about training, it was offered that “no matter how good your technology is, if you don’t train your providers on how to do a home visit, it’s a nightmare.”



Questions for the Future

There still are many looming questions about a post-pandemic world and the implications for virtual care. Some reimbursement models have changed, but there is quite a bit that is yet to be determined

“Payers want to tie to outcomes. With telehealth, it is difficult to determine the outcomes. We have to figure out how to tie outcomes to technology and partner with payers to come to an agreement and move virtual care forward in this space,” commented a senior executive leader from the healthcare space.

While significant strides have been made in telemedicine, there is still a multitude of challenges that must be overcome to optimize this form of healthcare delivery. For example, motivating the patients to obtain their blood work is still a requirement to accurately diagnose. Also, patient access to specialized equipment such as x-rays or heart monitors will still be needed. While physicians may be able to conduct a telemedicine visit, the patient still may need to access more traditional diagnostic tools to be properly diagnosed.

To further expand virtual healthcare’s horizons, it will also be very important to identify which medical needs or specialties are most suited to telemedicine and which segments of the population would benefit the most. A cautionary note to consider is that lab tests and x-rays appear to be declining as it relates to telemedicine visits, so it is imperative that virtual care treatment must be paired with the diagnostic tools that are fundamental to properly diagnosing and caring for patients.

Telemedicine has undoubtedly helped us weather the pandemic by providing medical care when it is most needed. Going forward, the significant potential of virtual care means many people who could not be diagnosed and receive treatment may now have access to professional medical care. This is especially important when serving the healthcare needs of patients in rural areas or the elderly who have mobility issues. Our challenge is to optimize telemedicine so that patients can receive the best possible outcomes, whether seeing a doctor virtually or in the office.

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