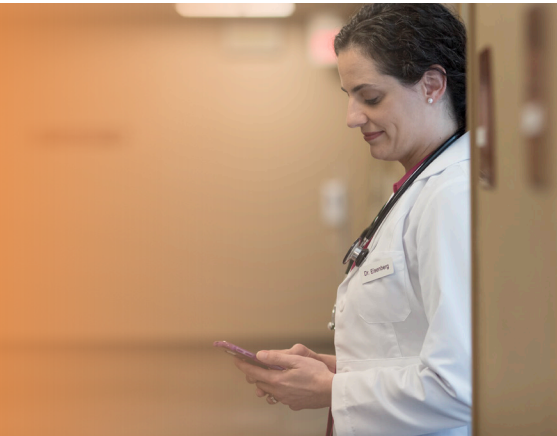OPTUM®

Telehealth and digital health solutions as part of your access-to-care approach

By Amanda Steele and Michele Molden

The rapid adoption and implementation of telehealth and digital solutions by delivery networks is among the many changes sparked by COVID-19. We've watched (and helped) organizations build and deploy these strategies for years. Yet it was rare that we saw executives, providers and administrators embracing these solutions together.

COVID-19 is a paradigm-shifting event in the way we think about provider-patient interactions. An e-visit is about to be as common as an annual physical, and organizations must prepare to respond to today's realities and needs. At the same time, they must consider the longer-term needs to use these programs well into the future. Right now, simply having a telehealth or digital health program are table stakes. Embedding these tools as part of your access-to-care strategy will be the way to:

- Differentiate your system
- Accelerate revenue
- Reach your consumers
- Advance your quality and patient safety goals

What is access to care?

Broadly, we define access to care as patients' ability to reach the right provider, at the right site of service, without hindrance or confusion. Organizations that are most successful customize this definition further to embed their culture — their mission, providers, patients and communities. And they use this statement as a guiding principle for their strategic and tactical responses.

Telehealth, digital health and access to care

Are telehealth and digital health platforms a strategy? A tool? A tactic? Should our operators own them? Our providers? Our strategists? Our technologists? The answer to each of these is yes. These platforms are many things and have many owners. So how can you make sure you're consolidating approaches to optimization and utilization that ensure adoption, provider satisfaction and patient satisfaction?

We believe the answer is embedding telehealth and digital health as a foundational component of a multidisciplinary, multimodal, access-to-care strategy.

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Our access teams are supporting organizations as they tackle the many modalities of this work.

1. **Choose a team captain.** Access to care is quickly and constantly evolving and impacts individuals across your whole organization. It's not a job to do off the side of your desk. Cutting-edge organizations are shaping their management structures to respond. They're creating patient access departments that go above and beyond traditional revenue cycle needs. We're working with delivery networks to refresh their organizational charts with patient access executives and interconnected, multidisciplinary teams who can implement solutions efficiently. With a macro view, a patient access executive approaches telehealth and digital health from many perspectives, ensuring these solutions work for all stakeholders.

2. **Redesign and streamline processes.** Are your processes, policies and procedures optimized (or even written to acknowledge) digital care delivery? Are the metrics you're measuring capturing telehealth visits? Are your patient service representatives trained and enfranchised? How is your contact center participating in digital health? Have you assessed and designed schedules that include e-visits? There's a lot to consider, and multiple parties need to be at the table to begin these efforts.

3. **Invest in practice operations.** To effectively deliver these digital solutions you'll need to renew attention to your practice operations. For success, organizations should now be designing revised purviews and accountabilities, and extending key skill sets across departments and specialties. You need line-of-sight visibility into performance, and an integrated team that enables you to rapidly implement technology at scale. Critical to digital health deployment are our clinical and clerical support staff and providers. It's time to look at:

   - Workflows (both in the clinic and in your EHR)
   - Compensation plans
   - Capacity management
   - Scheduling
   - Facilities management
   - Automation
   - Many other components and their bidirectional impact with digital health

4. **Understand revenue cycle impact.** For many years organizations were reticent about adopting digital health, stemming from lack of clarity related to reimbursement, finance, risk and compliance. We expect these changes to last well past the urgent COVID-19 efforts. And we recommend you approach the business of a telehealth visit as you do your existing patient interactions. These include preregistration, insurance verification, and time-of-service processes and payments. Setting your front-end revenue cycle up for success will be incredibly impactful as margins continue to erode in light of COVID-19 implications.

5. **Give the reins to your providers.** Telehealth and digital health are key places where provider leadership is integral to successful implementation and adoption. With providers at the helm, we expect significant innovation in this space. And not only in the next few years, but in the coming weeks and months.

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A collaborative group of leaders can design and implement successful telehealth and digital health programs, weaving these solutions into and throughout their organization. It's possible to rapidly deploy these solutions while simultaneously planning for post-COVID-19 utilization.

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