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4-21-2022

Maintaining Patient-Provider Relationships in Times of Telehealth

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Recommended Citation

Kaluza, Abigail Marilyn, "Maintaining Patient-Provider Relationships in Times of Telehealth" (2022).
Celebrating Scholarship and Creativity Day. 166.
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Findings: Debating the Role of Telehealth

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare networks and hospitals quickly mobilized to implement telehealth systems to reduce the risk of transmission during patient care visits¹. Based on interviews with 75 healthcare workers across 18 states, this research examines the benefits and challenges of widespread use of telehealth systems as a core component of healthcare delivery. While telehealth has proven to be useful for both patients and providers² throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it has brought to light inequalities and the technological barrier that telehealth brings affecting patient-provider relationships.

Methods

- Semi Structured Interviews with 75 healthcare workers across 18 states since April 2020
- Purposive and snowball sampling
- Group coding using MAXQDA

Benefits

- Allows patients to involve their families who may live far away
- Doctors themselves feel safer treating patients in the midst of a pandemic
- Patients who don't require physical exams, labs, or blood work can easily be seen and treated as necessary
- Care and support groups are still able to happen virtually, continuing meaningful conversation

"Virtual care and telehealth is here to stay. And so, I think that's probably one of the big things that coming out of it that's going to impact our care." – Sandra, Nurse from KS

"I think it's just made people more aware of the ease of conducting some of these business things virtually." – Tyler, Physician from NE

"If the patient's an over-the-road trucker, so he's got diabetes and hypertension and you know...but never can never really find time to Get in because he's always driving across the country or wherever. And now actually, he's checking in all the time and having video visits." – Robert, CHIO from MN

Drawbacks

- Fostering that crucial patient-provider relationship is difficult through virtual care
- Providers are paranoid they are missing things that would be found during a routine, in-person exam
- Persistent technology issues, many moving pieces within apps
- Not always accessible for aging patients, or those with disabilities

"They're pushing us further and further away from the patient." – Caroline, NP from OR

"I think maybe what you're asking at least partly is what are the limitations of telehealth. Yeah I'm paranoid that I'm missing stuff. Because I'm missing the physical exam, which is a huge part of what we do." – Sandra, Nurse from KS

"So I would say that's a change and it feels like a you know we're not in as intimate contact with them as we were. I mean I'm still, we're still sort of touching them, but just trying to be mindful of things. It just it has a different feel." – Lacey, Nurse Midwife from MN

Future Directions

- Future studies need to look into the impact of telehealth
- If telehealth contributed to increased medical mistrust
- Disparities between rural and urban residents in terms of telehealth availability and outcomes