In the face of rising healthcare costs and changing consumer demands, innovations are reshaping the delivery of medical care. Patients are now being diagnosed via a camera and computer screen, at the pharmacy down the street or from continuous data that is sent using a mobile application. Though this changing landscape may be difficult to manage, healthcare professionals must embrace these alternative and complementary forms of care, or risk losing patients and profit.

THE GROWING TREND TOWARD TELEMEDICINE

While many physicians still prefer traditional in-office visits, telemedicine — the use of telecommunication and information technology to provide clinical care from a distance — cannot be ignored as more patients seek convenient and cost-effective alternatives. In fact, the American Well 2015 Telehealth Survey found that 64% of American consumers surveyed would see a doctor via video.1 This includes the tech-savvy Millennials who make up a large portion of the consumer population and the 60+ demographic, whose mobility challenges can prevent them from getting to a doctor.

As physician and consumer acceptance of telemedicine grows, so will its usage and application. In 2015, the online platform Teladoc, which brings a licensed physician to a patient’s disposal, conducted 575,000 remote telehealth visits and predicts it will exceed 900,000 visits this year.2 Meanwhile, in Boston, Massachusetts General Hospital used telehealth to meet with burn patients from the Boston Marathon bombings who were living at a separate rehabilitation center. The technology allowed patients to maintain their regular physician check-ins, and avoid missing a day of critical rehabilitative therapy.

So while telemedicine isn’t new, it’s something that will be a growing component of healthcare delivery in the future. Therefore, healthcare practices must prepare themselves for this reality, and to adequately do so, they must understand exactly what objectives they want telemedicine to accomplish, e.g., provide cost-saving alternative care for clients, deliver service over greater distances or gain new clients seeking convenience.

Once practices pinpoint the goals behind their telemedicine program, they must ensure they have reimbursement streams in place — one of the most challenging issues when implementing telemedicine. This means practices must contract with payers, insurance companies and others to ensure the program is compliant with state guidelines and services will be reimbursed. Equally important, and easier to achieve, is making investments in technology, including minor investments in web cameras and a secure portal tied into patients’ electronic medical records to enable secure video-conferences between physicians and patients. It’s important to budget for system and application upgrades as well, remembering that technology advances quickly.

THE MOVE TO RETAIL

There are over 2,000 retail healthcare clinics in the U.S., and it’s predicted that this number will rise to 2,800 by 2017.3 Patients are flocking to these clinics — think CVS or Walgreens — because they’re quick, close and often cheaper than visiting a primary care physician. Although these clinics are competitors, healthcare practices can accept and embrace this trend in one of two ways.
By partnering with retail clinics, primary care physicians can gain new patients through referrals. This presents a huge opportunity as 40 - 50% of the patients seen at retail clinics report not having a primary care physician, a result of recent access to healthcare insurance because of the Affordable Care Act.4

These partnerships are becoming commonplace. Recently, the Cleveland Clinic struck a deal with CVS that will make doctors available on-demand through a telehealth platform at the CVS MinuteClinic locations in Ohio.

As an alternative, some practices have opted to create their own fast-track clinic in-house as the best way to capitalize on this growing trend. These in-house clinics are designed to provide a quick and limited encounter that rivals the experience patients receive at retail clinics. To compete, these clinics typically handle the 6 medical issues that retail clinics most report treating: sore throats, ear infections, sinus infections, female bladder infections, conjunctivitis, and general cough and flu symptoms.

**SELF-MONITORING WILL HELP THE TRANSITION TO VALUE-BASED HEALTHCARE**

As the transition to value-based healthcare continues and patients become more responsible for some aspects of their care, healthcare professionals will need to track a patient’s health outside of their annual physical. One solution is self-monitoring which provides a regular flow of healthcare data, enabling healthcare professionals to have a better idea of any illnesses, as well as insight into other facets of their patient’s life.

Physicians are ready to embrace these technological innovations with two thirds of those surveyed saying they would be willing to prescribe an app to help patients manage a chronic disease such as diabetes, and more than 40% said they are at least somewhat comfortable with relying on at-home test results to prescribe medication.5

With patient-self monitoring, practices do not need to make significant investments in monitoring equipment. Apps, which require minimal investment for practices, are quickly becoming one of the most common forms of self-monitoring technology that healthcare professionals recommend. Where appropriate to use, a physician should determine the best app available for each patient and their condition, keeping in mind its level of integration with EHRs, and whether it encourages the patient to continue to participate in their own care.

Without a doubt, technology is critical in the evolution of healthcare, but using it effectively is a balancing act between preserving the doctor-patient relationship and ensuring patients receive cost-effective and convenient care. As EHR connectivity increases and information can be shared more easily, the value of these alternative forms of care will grow. Practices that fail to adapt to these changing healthcare delivery methods will likely fall behind their peers who are offering more cost-effective, convenient and informed care.

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4 Huffington Post Business, “Why We’re Picking Walmart and CVS Over Doctors’ Offices”, 2015
5 PWC, “Healthcare delivery of the future: How digital technology can bridge time and distance between clinicians and consumers”, 2014

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