

Telehealth Offers Quicker Care For Long Island Patients

BY VANESSA CACERES

The next time you're sick, you may not have to drag yourself to a doctor's office. Instead, you might use a mobile device to connect with a health provider who can diagnose and treat you.

Telehealth is growing by about 20 percent each year, the research firm Kalorama Information reported in 2017. Telehealth continues to rapidly expand because it saves patients the time and energy of leaving their home, and it lets health providers use their time more efficiently. In turn, they are able to treat patients more quickly, said Iris Berman, Vice President of telehealth services at Northwell Health in New Hyde Park.

Although insurance coverage for telehealth is a work in progress, a growing number of insurers are reimbursing for visits.

Part of the growth comes from patient demand as well, said Dr. Nicholas Genes, associate

professor of emergency medicine at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York. "If people are able to 'FaceTime' with family and friends, they expect to do it with their doctors, too," he said. Virtual visits with doctors involve higher-definition technology and follow federal privacy laws.

Here's a sampling of telehealth advances going on Long Island.

EMPLOYEE CARE

There's a big push right now to use telehealth at Northwell Health, Berman said. One initial effort has involved tele-counseling for employees using

the Employee Assistance Program. Employees who are out on workers' compensation and disability also have used virtual visits with health providers. Telehealth for Northwell's Coumadin clinic enables patients to adjust their dosing when they get bloodwork done, Berman said, adding that behavioral services, dermatology, and orthopedics are among other specialties at Northwell where telehealth is used or will be in the near future, Berman said.

PSYCHIATRY

At Catholic Health Services, four of its hospitals use telehealth on the weekends when a patient goes to an emergency room and requires psychiatric care, said Dr. Ronald Brenner, chief of behavioral health services for Catholic Health Services. The video technology allows patient and staff to connect virtually to a psychiatrist, who is able to pan and zoom in to better evaluate a patient, Brenner said. One advantage is that the patient is seen almost immediately versus waiting for an in-person visit, Brenner said. The virtual psychiatric visits have received an 87 percent satisfaction rate from patients, Brenner said.

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The only downside for psychiatrists with telehealth is that there's no sense of smell. This could be an important indication to assess if a patient has not bathed for a while or smells of alcohol, Brenner said. However, ER staff members are now mindful of this and can pass relevant information on to the telepsychiatrist.

NEUROLOGY

Dr. Genes has worked in Mount Sinai Health System ERs where telehealth is used to consult with neurologists about patients who may be having a stroke. This virtual consult advises ER physicians whether or not to administer TPA, a risky but life-saving drug if someone is having a stroke. Telehealth is also used within the pediatric population.

South Nassau Communities Hospital in Oceanside is now the flagship hospital on Long Island for Mount Sinai Health System, so some of the telehealth options at Mount Sinai could benefit South Nassau in the future.

CLINICAL TRIALS, MED SCHOOL TRAINING

Stony Brook Medicine in Stony Brook has taken part in a telehealth trial during which hospital discharge patients received a mobile device, Bluetooth blood pressure cuff, pulse oximeter, and scale, said Dr. Kimberly Noel, telehealth director for Stony

Brook Medicine in Stony Brook. These tools were used for virtual weekly follow-up visits for up to a month. More than 90 percent of patients successfully used their medications and participated in the virtual visits, Noel said.

Stony Brook's medical school also has a telehealth medical school curriculum and training program, Noel said. Stony Brook Medicine is working to incorporate telehealth in various facets of care.

For patients who may use telehealth in the future, Noel advises using a physician who is licensed in the patient's home state and who has access to electronic medical records from the patient. Patients should be prepared to show and explain medicines they are taking to lessen the chance of medication prescription errors.

Although patients should speak up if they want in-person care, Noel believes patients should not feel shy about trying telehealth. "Many telehealth patients are older patients who don't otherwise have a lot of experience using the internet or advanced technology," she said.



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