

June 22, 2015



## **Telemedicine Opens Doors**

by Karen Davis, MD

Telemedicine services have been used for over 40 years, to improve healthcare delivery in rural, medically underserved areas. However, wider implementation of telemedicine can help both patients and physicians ameliorate healthcare disparities in both rural and urban communities. It has the potential to reduce costs and increase patient access to healthcare.

The lack of access to healthcare in the United States is one of the primary reasons for the existing disparities in healthcare across the country. These disparities are realized in both economic and human costs. Over the past several decades, the increase in chronic diseases, like diabetes, has created a tremendous burden on our healthcare system. Overall, chronic disease consumes 75 percent of the \$2 trillion US health expenditure. For diabetes alone, The National Diabetes Statistics Report for 2014 indicated that 29.1 million people or 9.3% of the US population has diabetes. The American Diabetes Association stated the economic costs totaled \$245 billion in 2012, accounting for one tenth of every dollar spent on healthcare. This economic strain is expected to rise with the increased prevalence of diabetes in United States.

One of the contributing factors to the lack of access is a growing physician shortage. This shortage is expected to become more apparent with the Affordable Care Act as more Americans are insured and aging baby boomers, with increased medical needs, further compromise an already overburdened system. A recent study conducted for the American Association of Medical Colleges predicts that by the year 2025 the United States will face a shortage of between 46,000-90,000 physicians, in both primary and specialty care, with specialty shortages being particularly high. Telehealth can be an essential part of a multifaceted strategy for addressing this shortage.

Dr. Nitasha Rimar, a board-certified endocrinologist who has been practicing tele-endocrinology in California since November 2014, has experienced the benefits of telemedicine first hand. She relates how telemedicine has offered benefits for her and her patients. Dr. Rimar explains:

"Telemedicine opens the door to healthcare for both patients and providers. Providers have the opportunity to set their own schedule and simply focus on clinical care rather than administrative work. Patients have access to a board-certified specialist who can maintain continuity of care within a short distance of their home. The benefits are endless - an improvement in patient health, reduction in hospitalization, and significant reduction in cost...Telemedicine has allowed me to positively impact the lives of numerous patients. Due to lack of access to care, many of my patients with disorders, such as diabetes, had not

June 22, 2015

seen an endocrinologist in years. By providing care through a telemedicine portal, I have been able to manage their condition and help improve their quality of life."

When asked if she believes telemedicine helps to improve outcomes, Dr. Rimar responds with a resounding, "Yes, telemedicine improves patient outcomes. It allows patients to access healthcare on a more regular basis which helps to improve management of their chronic disease." As an example, the doctor relates a personal story of how telemedicine affected the life of a patient: "There was one particular patient with diabetes who had been previously over-treated with insulin. As a result of his medication regimen, he developed low blood sugars which resulted in a loss of consciousness leading to a car accident. After meeting with him, I altered his medication profile so that he was no longer taking insulin and only relying on medications that do not promote hypoglycemia. He is now doing great and is safely back in the driver's seat."

Telehealth is helping to reshape the way healthcare is delivered, improving the efficiency of office visits, follow-up and home monitoring. The growth of telemedicine has exploded over the last several years. The future of telehealth offers even greater possibilities as more physicians, patients, hospitals, and health plans like UnitedHealthcare, WellPoint, and BlueCross endorse telehealth services. In a recent report, the American Hospital Association commented that as patients become more proactive in their health care delivery choices, utilization of telehealth services will increase from an estimated 250,000 patients in 2013 to an estimated 3.2 million patients in 2018.

For Dr. Rimar the future of telemedicine is clear. In addition to office-based visits, "It should expand to allow patients to see providers from the comfort of their own home. This would ensure better patient compliance and continuity of care. I believe telemedicine visits will soon be a regular option for patients to follow up with their provider. I also believe this option will be utilized more frequently by patients as compared to office-based visits. In a world where we are primarily communicating electronically, it is only a matter of time until such communication extends to the patient-physician relationship."