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Gavel to Gavel: Telehealth reforms lead to innovation

By: Jeff Roderick and Robert Glass Guest Columnists April 22, 2020



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Recent telehealth reforms intended to combat the rapid spread of COVID-19 have made it easier for health care providers to treat patients virtually – helping patients avoid emergency room and urgent care visits, and mitigating unnecessary exposure for providers.

These reforms are giving providers the latitude they need to innovate, and one Oklahoma-based telehealth acute and critical care provider is leading the charge.

Tulsa's Regional Brain Institute is an intensely patient-focused multi-specialty health care practice group that leverages telehealth solutions to deliver essential specialist services as close to the patient's home as possible, operating as an innovator and demonstration model for the future of health care. RBI recently collaborated with EMSA to triage patients in Oklahoma City and Tulsa that have COVID-19 symptoms via RBI's Lighthouse Virtual Care Center.

Here is how it works:

- A patient calls 911 seeking medical assistance and is transferred to an EMSA dispatcher.
- EMSA screens the patient for COVID-19 symptoms and, if present, confirms the patient desires to participate in an expedited virtual care evaluation with an emergency medicine or internal medicine specialist.
- EMSA transfers the patient to a VCC operator for further telehealth screening.
- The VCC operator obtains the patient's consent for a virtual consultation, confirms the patient has the capability to participate in an audio/video virtual consultation, and joins an RBI specialist to the call.
- The RBI specialist makes an introduction and together with the VCC operator explains the procedure for the virtual consultation, then the patient is texted a link for a virtual waiting room.
- The RBI specialist and patient join each other in the virtual waiting room where the physician can engage with, examine, and evaluate the patient, resulting in a consultation that guides the patient in most circumstances to safely remain home and achieves a plan of care to mitigate the circumstances prompting their 911 call.
- The RBI specialist drops a Consultation Note into an EMSA medical record repository and provides EMSA with a closeout communication or notification that the patient needs to be transported to a hospital.

The result – patients receive an expedited evaluation and consultation with a specialist, emergency room visits are materially reduced, and providers and uninfected persons avoid unnecessary exposure. Innovative use-cases like this telehealth application by RBI to triage patients with COVID-19 symptoms demonstrate the compelling case for telehealth's role in the future of health care delivery models.

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