This guide will discuss how social media is used by both physicians and patients, describe the frequent concerns physicians may have regarding social media use, and recommend actions physicians can take to maintain a positive professional online presence.
About the Authors

Kerry Ann Hayon, MHA
Director, Practice Solutions and Research, Massachusetts Medical Society

Kerry Ann Hayon, director, Physician Practice Resource Center (PPRC) at the Massachusetts Medical Society brings more than 12 years of consulting, hospital administration, and physician practice management experience to the PPRC. Kerry Ann is a Six-Sigma process improvement expert with extensive experience working with physicians and physician practices in the area of strategy, operations, program development, and revenue cycle enhancement with a particular expertise in practice administration. She focuses on providing practical solutions for physician practices in light of the current health care environment. Kerry Ann is an active member of the American College of Healthcare executives, the Medical Group Management Association, and the Healthcare Financial Management Association. Kerry Ann holds a Masters in Healthcare Administration from The George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Jillian Pedrotty, MHA
Specialist, Practice Solutions and Research, Massachusetts Medical Society

Jillian Pedrotty is the specialist for the Physician Practice Resource Center at the Massachusetts Medical Society. Jillian’s industry background includes working with large and small physician practices, clinics, and hospitals. Having completed the Cleveland Clinic’s Patient Experience Leadership Certificate Program, her key interest is improving the patient experience over the continuum of care. Other key areas of concentration include, practice management, billing and reimbursement, payer relations, training and development, and education. Jillian is an active member of the Medical Group Management Association and the American College of Healthcare Executives, where she serves on the membership and advancement committee. Jillian earned her Master’s in Healthcare Administration at Suffolk University’s Sawyer Business School and her Bachelor of Science degree at Northeastern University’s Bouvé College for Health Sciences.

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The information in this booklet is intended to serve as a general resource and guide. It is not to be construed as legal advice. Attorneys with knowledge of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 and its accompanying regulations should be consulted regarding the application of these laws to specific situations.
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Introduction

The physician-patient relationship has transformed over the last couple of decades, and the emergence of telemedicine technologies has been a contributing factor, especially in recent years. Innovative technologies provide opportunities to alleviate some of the challenges afflicting the health care system, such as access to convenient care. Many organizations around the country have started utilizing telemedicine as a mechanism to improve operational efficiency, the patient experience, and financial portfolios.

As telemedicine continues to surge in popularity and more organizations decide to engage in different technologies, there are a number of practice management strategies that should be considered prior to implementation. This guide will explore the challenges and benefits, while providing practical considerations for physicians and physician practices that may be interested in engaging in telemedicine.

Historical Evolution of the Physician-Patient Relationship

By the start of the 20th century, a number of factors were pushing medical procedures from homes to hospital facilities. Further knowledge of the benefits of a clean and sanitary environment led to cleaner hospitals and improved health outcomes, which in turn yielded public trust.

Furthermore, technological and knowledge advances generated new diagnostic and procedural medical equipment for utilization. The equipment tended to be immobile and expensive, thus leading to the need for a permanent location to house these new tools. As a result of innovation, the physician-patient relationship shifted and began to develop in physician offices and hospitals, rather than in the patients’ home.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, when the escalating price of health care in the United States has been deemed unsustainable. The goal of the health care reform effort is not only to reduce the per capita cost of health care, but to do so while improving the health of the population, improving the quality of care, and improving the patient experience. In order to accomplish these established goals, leaders and providers are looking for innovative mechanisms to conveniently communicate with patients to better coordinate care and keep patients out of the hospital. The introduction of new technologies and the increasing focus on telemedicine are examples of how organizations are attempting to meet these goals.
Telemedicine Basics

Telemedicine is defined by the Institute of Medicine as “the use of electronic information and communications technology to provide and support health care when distance separates participants,” and it comes in various forms from inexpensive smartphones to more complex equipment.¹ The term telehealth is “sometimes used to refer to a broader definition of remote health care that does not always involve clinical services, but the American Telemedicine Association (ATA) uses [telehealth and telemedicine] in the same way one would refer to medicine or health in the common vernacular.”² For the purposes of this discussion, the term telemedicine will be used.

The various technologies that make up telemedicine can be grouped into four main domains defined in the following table:

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<th>TYPE OF TELEMEDICINE</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>COMMON EXAMPLE:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Store and Forward (Asynchronous)</td>
<td>Transmission of recorded health history, such as digital images and documents through an electronic communication system</td>
<td>Practitioners sending X-rays, MRIs, digital photos of skin conditions, etc. to specialist for review</td>
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<td>Live Video Conferencing (Synchronous)</td>
<td>Real-time, live interactive between patient and provider through audio-visual telecommunication technology</td>
<td>A practitioner virtually consults a patient via two-way video chat platform</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile Health (mHealth)</td>
<td>Practice of medicine supported by mobile devices, tablets, and PDAs</td>
<td>Patient receives text message reminders to take their medication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remote Patient Monitoring</td>
<td>Transmission of patient-collected health and medical data to a provider in another location</td>
<td>Wi-Fi- or Bluetooth-enabled wearables that may report patient activity or heart rate</td>
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¹IOM definition
Telemedicine Impact on the Physician-Patient Relationship

Although telemedicine devices have been around for decades, they have recently been gaining increasing traction in the market. Both patients and physicians are interested in utilizing such technologies to facilitate access to services for patients and improve disease and care management for physicians. It has been forecasted that the telemedicine market for devices and software will increase from $736 million in 2011 to $2.5 billion in 2018.¹ The sentiment is that providing patients with more convenient ways to communicate with their providers will allow for better care coordination, which in turn should improve health outcomes, and ideally lower health care expenditures.

However, it is important to remember that the health care industry was built on the cornerstone of physicians forming relationships with their patients so that patients feel confident that the physician is making the most appropriate medical recommendations to improve their health. The rise of telemedicine has many providers concerned that it will hinder or impede the relationship that forms through face-to-face encounters.

The following are the primary areas where telemedicine may impact the patient-physician relationship.

Establishing the Physician-Patient Relationship

Massachusetts state law has not yet confronted whether telemedicine is an appropriate method to establish a physician-patient relationship. Therefore, the decision is left up to physician judgement on a case-by-case basis and may be influenced by the specialty of practice and patient condition. Some states do require an in-person “face-to-face” visit as a required component of establishing a physician-patient relationship, whereas the AMA recommends that a video component be required if telemedicine is to be used as a medium to establish a physician-patient relationship (this means that email or audio-only interaction would not suffice).²


Continuity of Care

Depending on the strategies deployed, telemedicine has potential to improve or disparage continuity of care. On one hand, the convenience of accessing one’s physician through telemedicine technologies may sway patients away from seeking care at alternative locations such as retail clinics, urgent care centers, and hospital emergency rooms.

Conversely, some retail telemedicine applications pose a potential threat to continuity of care. For example, a patient might have received care via live video conferencing because they were unable to see their primary care physician (PCP) and the consultation notes might not get sent back to the PCP. The PCP may be unaware of the issue that patient had and the care received, ultimately resulting in a loss of patient information. Therefore, it is important for physician practices to embed a process where the patient is asked if they received care elsewhere at each visit.

Concerns Related to Telemedicine

While there are many entities embracing telemedicine and incorporating it into their practice operations, there is still some apprehension related to this innovation around care delivery. The following concerns exist in regards to integrating telemedicine into a standard delivery of care.

Privacy and Security

Providers are still responsible for abiding by HIPAA regulations and keeping patient information and medical history confidential, even when providing telemedicine services. Questions have been raised whether telemedicine is a secure-enough way to deliver care and remain compliant with HIPAA, as electronic transmission of information may be susceptible to hackers. Additionally, operating telemedicine technologies requires involving a technical support team which may or may not be in direct control of the practice to run the systems, which increases the number of people with potential access to patient health information.
State Licensure

In Massachusetts, the Board of Registration in Medicine (BRM) regulates physician licensing and includes telemedicine in their definition of the “practice of medicine.” This means that a physician must have a license to practice medicine in Massachusetts to be able to provide telemedicine services. Additionally, the state BRM requirements require an established physician-patient relationship, which requires a “face-to-face visit.” However, each state has its own licensing system and requirements so there is a question of whether a physician can provide electronic care to a patient in a state they are not licensed in. Furthermore, it is unknown whether the BRM will add additional licensing requirement for physician who would like to participate in telemedicine.

Scope of Practice

Currently, the BRM and other Massachusetts governing or regulating entities have not formulated any well-defined regulations as to what medical services can be provided via tele-communication. The line as to what requires an in-person visit and what is appropriate for telemedicine services remains blurred. However, it is worth noting that the American Medical Association adopted new guidelines for “Ethical Practice in Telemedicine” that can be accessed on their website.

As mentioned, the state BRM requirements require an established physician-patient relationship, which requires a “face-to-face visit,” though it is not clear whether this visit must be in-person or could occur via a video call or other telemedicine modality. The state BRM “internet prescribing” policy states “a prescription for a controlled substance to be valid shall be issued for a legitimate medical purpose by a practitioner acting in the usual course of his professional practice.” The guidance goes on to say that a “usual course of professional practice” entails forming a “physician-patient relationship that is for the purpose of maintaining the patient’s well-being and the physician must conform to certain minimum norms and standards for the care of patients, such as taking an adequate medical history and conducting an appropriate physical and/or mental status examination and recording the results.”5 A physician must contemplate the best practice for staying compliant with the BRM policy when incorporating telemedicine into practice.

Malpractice Liability

As telemedicine continues to be implemented and lessons are learned about mitigating risk, malpractice insurance will most likely evolve in order to ensure that providers will have adequate and pertinent coverage. However, malpractice carriers have taken little precedent with regard to the creation of telemedicine specific coverage. Providers would benefit from discussing coverage options with their malpractice insurer at the early stages of planning for implementation of telemedicine in order to understand what additional coverage may be required.

Credentialing

Physicians must be credentialed at a hospital to be reimbursed for the services they provided, and telemedicine is no different. Already a tumultuous process, telemedicine threatens to add more complications to the credentialing process if a provider wishes to have the ability to provide telemedicine services. Furthermore, if a provider wants to be credentialed at more than one hospital, then it will add significant administrative work to complete.

Payment for Services

The question of how providers will be reimbursed for proving telemedicine services is currently one of the most popular questions in the health care environment. Although health plan insurers are beginning to implement telemedicine reimbursement policies, there has yet to be widespread adoption. Providers contemplating incorporation of telemedicine services in their practice should discuss with their health plan representatives the services that will and will not be covered.

Discuss what telemedicine services will be covered with health plan representatives.
Potential Benefits of Telemedicine

While there are a number of concerns, there are also a number of advantages that come with the connectivity and innovation telemedicine technologies provide. These technologies are helping to close access and financial gaps, while enhancing the patient experience.

It is important to consider your practice setting and assess what strategies make sense for your specific environment. A few of the key potential benefits that have been observed nationally from using telemedicine technologies include the following.

Improving Patient Access to Routine and Specialty Care

There is a lack of providers that meet the growing demand of patients around the country; however, the power of connectivity has allowed telemedicine technologies to bridge gaps of access to services, especially in rural areas. Providers have the capability of expanding their reach through telemedicine and provide health care services to patients in their local communities, saving the patient from traveling a long distance.

Improving Case Management, Population Health, and Health Outcomes

Telemedicine empowers providers to continuously monitor and interact with patients, which is extremely helpful to encourage a healthy lifestyle, especially for chronic disease patients. Remote monitoring capabilities allow providers the opportunity to assess, intervene, and change the patient care routine in a more live-time manner. Additionally, quicker access to a physician for patients with chronic care and other illnesses can help in expediting care as a patient can also be diagnosed and treated earlier, ultimately improving health outcomes.
Reducing Cost

One of the core challenges the U.S. health care system faces is lowering per capita expenditures, and telemedicine has been observed as a facilitator of better efficiency and as a result can help in reducing the cost of care. Having the ability to intervene and provide a patient with treatment has helped to reduce unnecessary ED visits, thus reducing costs for the health system.6

Improving the Patient Experience

Another fundamental principal of health care reform is improving the experience of the care that a patient receives. The Beryl Institute defines the patient experience as the “sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization’s culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care”; so organizations that offer more convenience often improve the patient perceptions of the experience of their care. An example of a convenient telemedicine device is the patient portal, where patients can access their health information and diagnostic tests, and make appointments, among other features.

Strategically Managing Telemedicine Implementation

As previously discussed, there are numerous challenges that must be considered and anticipated when exploring telemedicine opportunities; however, the reward of a successful implementation can positively impact your practice’s bottom line, employee engagement, and patient satisfaction. The following practice management considerations should be taken into account when starting to strategically plan how to incorporate telemedicine mechanisms into your practice’s operations.

1. Conduct a Needs Assessment

Since each practice is unique, there is no “one-size-fits-all” model for implementing telemedicine. Therefore, it is important to conduct a needs assessment and identify areas in your practice where telemedicine would make sense. This includes understanding physician and practice staffs perspectives on utilizing telemedicine, any additional human resource needed for implementation, the financial repercussion, and the area of the practice where telemedicine would make the most impact for the practice.

a. **Identify Patients**
   After understanding the needs of the practice, the next step would be to identify a patient population that telemedicine would serve well (i.e., patients with certain diseases or who live too far to routinely access care).

b. **Consider What Services Make Sense for Your Practice**
   Not all services or visits may be appropriate for telemedicine. Consider what services make sense to provide in light of the patients you plan to offer telemedicine services to and what makes sense from a physician care standpoint. Also, considering what health care services your patients may be seeking elsewhere and why and determine if telemedicine services may be appropriate for addressing this gap.

2. **Ensure Leadership Support**
   Telemedicine is an extension of the traditional patient consults and represents an innovative shift in how health care services are delivered; therefore, it is extremely important to have a vision and support from the leaders of the organization. Without support from the top of the organization’s hierarchy, it will be extremely difficult to obtain the necessary resources required for a successful implementation. Results from the needs assessment conducted can help leverage your idea with data that supports your logic for telemedicine implementation.

3. **Define the Implementation Team**
   It would be helpful to identify a clinical and administrative champion who will lead the change and manage the process. The size of the implementation team will vary based on the size of the organization and intensity of organizational change, but considering including the following individuals to get a broader scope of challenges and opportunities that may be encountered over the course of implementation.

   - Project Manager
   - Clinical Staff Representative
   - Information Technology Representative
   - Financial Officer
   - Legal Representative
   - Patient Advocate

There is no “one-size-fits-all” model for implementing telemedicine.
4. **Conduct an External Market Analysis**

Researching the external environment can provide an understanding of the issues that exist outside of the practice and allow for strategy formulation that anticipates potential external environmental impact. Additionally, a competitive analysis will provide a picture of how competitors in the area and around the country are using telemedicine, which in turn can yield ideas for a strategy in order to support the goals the practice has outlined.

5. **Set Goals**

The telemedicine implementation team should work to define clear goals for the initiative so that all stakeholders are aligned and working towards the same desired end state. Communication around the goals should occur at all levels of the practice, and should be clearly communicated to staff. The goals should be consistent with the mission, vision, and values of the organization and supported by leadership. Progress on implementation goals should be routinely reported to leadership and practice staff.

6. **Research Vendors**

After conducting a needs assessment, determining what services your organization will focus on and the particular patients you plan to provide telemedicine services for, the type of telemedicine mechanisms required should be more defined. Vendor selection is an important component of an implementation plan and should consider what functionality is needed to improve efficiency, not hinder it. Some vendors may not offer solutions that make sense for smaller practices or larger institutions, so it is essential that stakeholders have a full understanding of the specific functionality and niche a specific vendor fits into. Reviewing references and speaking with colleagues about their experience with their particular vendors may help you get to gain insight into the pros and cons of the various vendors.
A few examples of questions you may find helpful to ask vendors when inquiring about services include the following:

- What are the initial and on-going costs?
- Can I ePrescribe and bill through the platform?
- Is the platform HIPAA compliant?
- What are the training requirements? Will you provide a trainer?
- What is the quality of the video?
- Do I need to purchase supplemental equipment? If so, what?
- Is the platform cloud-based?
- What technical support do you offer?
- Will the technology interface with your current electronic health record (EHR)?
  - If not, what options exist for ease of use for capturing patient data in your EHR?
7. **Develop an Implementation Plan**

After assessing your organizational environment and selecting the telemedicine vendor you believe will best fit your needs, the next step is to work with your vendor of choice to develop a timeline and action plan for implementation. The implementation plan should be detailed and address all the areas that require adjustment due to the organizational change and any anticipated barriers. It is important to remember that there is likely to be circumstances that arise that might offset your timeline, but don’t let that deter your progress and do your best to get back on track with the timeline. The following are some details to consider when devising your implementation plan:

- Formulate an implementation team and identify roles and responsibilities.
- Determine start up and operating costs of your telemedicine program.
- Identify value of services for the organization and patients.
- Research payer policies related to telemedicine and identify payer mix.
- Determine and define tasks that need to be completed and create a process map.
- Develop written telemedicine policies and procedures.
  - How will appointments be scheduled?
  - How will staff be trained and for how long?
  - Who is responsible for maintaining telemedicine program?
  - How will telemedicine mechanism be integrated into clinical operations?
- Develop HIPAA compliant vendor contracts and business associates agreements.
- Understand the attributes and functionalities of the hardware and software.
8. Monitoring Performance

Once the telemedicine program is implemented and initiated, the process shouldn't stop there. There should be some process in place using tangible metrics that evaluate how the change has impacted the organization and how well the services are working both operationally and with regard to patient care. Consider what is working well and what may need to be tweaked so that the experience for both physicians and patients is valuable. For example, implementing a survey to assess both the experience of patients and providers involved in the telemedicine visits is one effective way to assess the opportunities and potential pitfalls from the perspective of the primary utilizers. Additionally, monitoring on-going performance in terms of success and opportunity for improvement may serve as a key opportunity for expansion to additional patient populations within your practice where telemedicine use may make sense. Monitoring performance will help you identify challenges and develop strategies that will assist to alleviate the issue and improve the program.

Conclusion

The increased use of technology in the health care industry over the last decade can in many cases be helping to provide enhanced access to care in promotion of enhanced health care experiences both clinically and from a convenience standpoint. Although telemedicine is increasingly accepted, a number of unanswered questions remain. While there are success stories nationally and locally, telemedicine technology appear to be one mechanism by which practices may be able to improve access to care, potentially improve the patient experience, and also improve health outcomes. Careful consideration of one’s own unique practice setting and the best avenues for strategic implementation are important in order to positively contribute to operational efficiency, convenient care for both patient and physician, and ultimately an enhanced physician-patient relationship.
The Physician Practice Resource Center is a key benefit of the Massachusetts Medical Society membership that focuses on providing practical solutions for complex problems. Our goal is to ensure that physician practices have the information, resources, and support needed to maintain a thriving practice in an evolving health care environment.

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The continuously changing environment makes it difficult to balance managing the external forces with daily practice operations. We strive to keep informed on the various health care trends and analyze how they will influence practice management.

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Increasing regulatory, legislative, and operational burden has made practicing medicine complicated. By examining the health care landscape, we are able to translate the implications of current trends into informative guides that equip physician practices with pragmatic management considerations and best practices.

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