

Telehealth and Trust among Military Health Beneficiaries

An Ipsos Point of View



Service members participate in telemedicine training exercise aboard USNS Mercy. Photo courtesy of DVIDS taken by Petty Officer 3rd Class Cameron Pinske.

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Introduction

In our current time of pandemic related social distancing the challenge of getting access to care are that much more difficult. Telehealth offers a way to receive care without having to leave your home. In normal times medical issues, like accidental injuries, new onset of fever or rash, or the need to get a prescription refilled, can require time consuming efforts to make an appointment with your care provider. Wait times can increase if your care provider is away, or it is after hours, or there are other obstacles. These problems inevitably occur at the most inconvenient times. Telehealth access affords possibilities to address these challenges for both patients and providers.

Telehealth offers an option that is convenient and often results in a more immediate consultation with the possibility of a positive healthcare outcome. But is telehealth a safe alternative to an office visit? The evidence suggests that it is, and it is already used widely by many healthcare practitioners. For instance, doctors routinely use telehealth for health coaching, the delivery of care in rural settings, and it is also utilized for a variety of healthcare needs in the Military Health System. As recently as last month (March), the New York Times reported that telehealth has seen much higher utilization.

Telehealth, or telemedicine as it is also known, is the extension of medical consulting across distance using telephonic and other communication technologies—specifically those that incorporate video. It can extend to the utilization of wearable devices that connect to healthcare providers and can deliver vital signs and even some testable lab materials in real

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Benefits of Telehealth
 • Increased access to care • Reduced costs • Lower wait times • Convenient for patient and provider • Addresses privacy concerns • Decreased transportation risks

time. The benefits of telehealth are the opportunity to receive counsel from one's provider without having to be present in their office or clinic. This can help with patient decision making around whether to seek care for a new onset condition, getting counsel on complications, asking medication questions and arranging prescription renewals, or any number of other interactions. This leads to increased access to care and can help address privacy concerns while reducing costs, wait times, and lowering the risks of patients driving alone or under the influence of medications in the face of difficulties arranging transportation.

Furthermore, telehealth offers the opportunity for on-site clinicians to receive expert guidance from either more senior colleagues or from consulting specialists or both. The convenience for patients, and providers, is one of the main reasons that using telehealth to support primary care represents such an important opportunity. However, beyond primary care, the military has developed novel uses for this treatment modality, particularly in delivering specialty care.

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Scope of Telehealth Offerings in the Military

The U.S. Military is an early adopter of telehealth and in the 1990s established a centralized command for electronic health, medical informatics and advanced medical imaging research and development in the Telemedicine and Advanced Technology Research Center located in Maryland near Washington, DC. The U.S. Military's application of these technologies has found impact in varied clinical specialties and arenas including traumatic injury, neurology, behavioral health, other specialty care, and general practice.

One way the military has used telehealth has been to deliver "virtual" specialty care while first responders and general care providers treat patients close to their accident or injury site. This has been especially valuable in combat situations.

A second area of the use of telehealth has been to use it in behavioral health care providing rapid diagnoses to patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), providing safe space consultations for those who have experienced sexual assault by other Servicemembers and for whom being in a public setting triggers anxiety and fear.

Another Military application of telehealth has been in coaching patients with chronic conditions. According to an article in the *Joint Base San Antonio News* published in March 2019, the Air Force Medical Service has been using Project Echo (in partnership with the University of New Mexico) to employ a telehealth education program in Diabetes Management Education. Training sessions for diabetes management were broadcast to providers to broaden the audience for Grand Rounds away from single facilities and to the Air Force health system.

Ipsos Contribution

A recent Ipsos Beryl Institute survey showed that over a third of respondents prefer a telehealth visit when receiving the results of medical tests, talking to behavioral health counselors, describing symptoms to providers, and checking in after a hospital stay.

In an Ipsos study conducted in the United Kingdom, the overall level of trust in physicians is upwards of 90 percent. However, in looking closer at this figure some potential problem areas appear in which telehealth may play a role. Approximately 34 percent of physicians in the U.K. have reported using telemedicine to consult specialists. While this may speed up the pace of consultations and the transfer of key information to general practice physicians, it has the unintended consequence of increasing the perception that general practice physicians are gatekeepers to specialist care. General practitioners should engage with their patients to explain that telehealth speeds their care, rather than serves as a barrier to specialists.

While this perspective sees telehealth as a tool that physicians and other providers may utilize to manage patient access to specialist care, telemedicine and telehealth has found a place in the world of connected health increasing its value for patients. Connected health is the use of tools to monitor and provide health feedback and information remotely. One of the best examples of connected health are the smart watches and fitness trackers that are currently in wide use. Beyond tracking health, connected health



has become linked to companies like Babylon Health which provides remote healthcare consultation in Canada, U.K., and Rwanda and, according to research by Ipsos, is contracted to organizations as large and complex as the National Health System of the U.K.

In collaboration with WEGO Health (a network of patient leaders), Ipsos developed a presentation that explores the interaction of trust and reputation with impacts that are extendable to telemedicine. One of the risks associated with telemedical interventions is breach of privacy. When telehealth is limited to provider consultations breach of privacy risks may be low. But what about when telehealth is delivered through apps that support treatment programs such as the ones that have been tested in military health-care settings. Key learnings include maintaining reputation through careful practices that ensure that patient information will not be lost to privacy breaches and transparency about how patient information will be utilized. Care providers remain among the most trusted professions in the U.S., and the tech industry also continues to engender trust, however both clinical providers and the technology industry remain vulnerable to reputational damage through breach of trust.

Conclusion

Ipsos is positioned to support organizational goals to amplify telehealth options. Ipsos has tools that can help providers from developing a suite of telehealth options through conducting research on the public's perception of telehealth, to assisting in informed implementation through the preparation of journey maps and use case scenarios. As part of connected health monitoring, Ipsos can assist with "fair benchmarking" to help evaluate how patients' experience telehealth options, build on existing patient experience surveys, provide rapid feedback as well as develop in-depth analytics and dashboards to help monitor the delivery of care, and advise on organizational change management as needed. We are prepared to work with our clients to develop thought leadership around the facts and myths associated with telehealth as well as to produce memos and health activation tools to inform and guide patients through strategic communications. We also offer advisory services focused on other strategic communications for our clients' stakeholders, including planning for and implementing strategic communications campaigns, stakeholder analyses (including segmentation analyses), and developing talking points for leaders.



As new healthcare challenges emerge, particularly around the current Covid-19 pandemic, telehealth is poised to become an even more critical tool and resource in directing individuals to appropriate levels of care. Through telehealth, providers can make rapid assessments, guide and direct patients to enhanced levels of care, serve as a healthcare resources, and provide informed, sympathetic listeners for patients.

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