

Telehealth Removes Barriers to Care & Addresses Three Components of Prevention Key to the Medical Home Model

Editor's note: the Medical Home model features a comprehensive primary care setting that provides or arranges for all the patient's care needs including acute, chronic, preventive, and end-of-life care. The model relies on care coordination, health coaches, and the use of health information technology to enable information sharing among medical professionals and patients, as well as the use of remote monitoring of clinical data.

“While the word prevention usually conjures up the notion of primary prevention, or averting the onset of a disease or disorder, it is important to recall that prevention also encompasses additional aspects of reducing the negative impact of disease:

- Secondary prevention: slowing or minimizing the progression of that disease or disorder.
- Tertiary prevention: precluding the complications of that disease or disorder, such as avoiding cardiovascular disease, loss of vision or lower limb amputation for diabetics.

“Today, telehealth programs [...] address all three aspects of prevention:

- Primary prevention: providing telehealth education, counseling, and health advocacy services to prevent a disease at the primary level, including the delivery of information regarding exercise, diet, or lifestyle changes that would inhibit the onset of a disease. These types of wellness initiatives have proven to be effective in driving permanent behavioral changes that lead to improved health.
- Secondary prevention: providing telehealth coaching, advice, and direction to individuals following the initial diagnosis in order to inhibit the progression of that disease. As an example, an individual who is overweight or obese can prevent the progression of diabetes by losing weight through better diet and improved activity.
- Tertiary prevention: providing ongoing, timely advice via telephone including personalized instructions and recommendations to prevent the complications of that disease.

“This raises the importance of health literacy, the capability of an individual to obtain, to understand, and to put into action the information and the science that will help that person be healthy. Health literacy must be a mutual responsibility of the communicator, the recipient, and the medium of communication. It should not be the sole responsibility of the patient and should not be construed as patients simply struggling to understand what the health professional has stated. Health literacy goes hand-in-hand with telehealth: health professionals as senders of a health message must communicate in ways and terms that the patient can readily understand. Terminology, cultural awareness, and sensitivity are critical in health communication. Communication should be bi-directional, with both provider and patient sharing information and insight with each other.

“A telehealth platform is ideal for every level of preventive care since it allows the “partners” in communication – the sender and the receiver – to express themselves adequately, repeat instructions, and clarify information as needed through the medium of telehealth. The telephone continues to function as a reliable, ubiquitous, and easy-to-use tool which can enhance physician-patient relationships and ultimately improve health understanding and outcomes.

Promoting Patient-Centered Healthcare...and Health

“With growing support for the medical home model and the supportive role of telehealth programs [...] it is important to recognize the subtle difference between “medical care” and “healthcare.” The term medical care implies interventional care, an action to fix what is broken or already ill; healthcare includes prevention of illness or injury as well as interventional care.

“Today, a third term is being used, one that more clearly communicates the raison d’être of the medical home: health. Medical care implies that the doctor is providing care; healthcare connotes that health professionals are again providing both prevention and intervention services. However, by utilizing the simple term health, we articulate a partnership between the health professional that possesses the science and information and effectively communicates with the person/patient who becomes an ongoing and active partner in achieving and maintaining health.

“Communications is what telehealth is all about since it works on behalf of the person and supports the transition from provider-centric to patient-centric care. It helps providers by empowering them to monitor and manage patient care from a distance without regard to location and minimizing the need for patient travel when not necessary for the interaction. It further empowers patients and enhances their interactions with their health professionals. And, it improves the health of communities through more accessible communications that lead to improved health activities.

“In summary, effective telehealth programs have the real potential to improve the health and well being of individuals, the communities in which they live, work, and play — and all society.”

This featured excerpt is taken from the full text of “Telephone Connectivity Supports Medical Home Model and Removes Barriers to Care” by Kenneth P. Moritsugu, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.C.P.M and published September 2008.

The full text may be viewed on-line at www.telehealthreports.com/index.html (accessed October 20, 2008).

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