Telehealth Is More than Just Equipment

By Mary DeVany

The latest telemedicine technology may have lots of bells and whistles, but it’s the organization’s overall preparedness for a telehealth program that will determine its success.

It seems to be more than a passing fancy, and your organization has decided to step into this thing called “telehealth.” You’ve priced equipment, you’ve budgeted for it and you’re ready to purchase and get moving.

Stop.

If budgeting and purchasing equipment are the only steps of preparation you’ve taken, take a step back. Spending time now to plan how the equipment will be used before the program’s startup will reduce some of the challenges down the road.

Plan the Program

Establishing a solid telehealth program within the organization will take some work, so begin with a plan. First, confirm that your communications infrastructure will support telehealth services. Then identify one educational event or specialty service that is most likely to be successful, and work out whatever kinks arise. Once processes are in place and that single application is running smoothly, then build on that success with additional services and programs.

Plan to track the impact of telehealth from the start of the program. Did you reduce the number of times staff had to travel? What ancillary services were provided at your facility because of telehealth consults? Were customers satisfied, and would they be disappointed if telehealth services were not available? How has this impacted the quality of patient care?

If you know the answers to questions like these, justifying the program through future budget cycles becomes easier. Confirm the resources you have (people, budget, etc.) and those you will need in the future (an RN to present the patient remotely to the clinician, additional clinical devices for clinical events, etc.) to ensure your internal structure will support ongoing telehealth activities. Incorporate system upgrades and equipment replacement into your long-range plan every five years. Data tracked over the life of your program will help justify these enhancements.

While initial interest in telehealth will likely be high, it is important to keep telling your story—over and over again. Share the benefits of telehealth with your entire organization on a regular basis, especially those not directly involved. Often, people are not ready to embrace something new until they have identified a need of their own.

Be sure to orient new leaders and providers as they come on board. Program support from a variety of voices and directions will strengthen the position that telehealth is essential to the success of the organization.
Develop an Understanding

Originally, telemedicine was defined by interactive videoconferencing technology. Innovative technologies in health care continue to expand the definition of “telehealth,” which now also includes various “store and forward” applications (think e-mail with attachments, sent in an information-secure environment), teleradiology and remote patient monitoring both in the home and in many intensive care settings.

Flexibility in what telehealth means to your organization allows for greater collaboration and encourages integration at a more centralized level. This helps further discourage the concept of telehealth as a different kind of health care. No matter what technology is used, the focus must be on what telehealth can do for the patient and the organization. For telehealth to be fully embraced, it must be intertwined as a standard tool used in everyday patient care.

Take time to specifically identify what services should be provided and/or received and why. Talk to your staff. Make sure the identified needs are real, not just perceived.

If the plan is to participate in educational events from a distance, identify the events and who would regularly attend. If the plan is to access specialty clinical services, identify which specialty physicians you plan to utilize. Do relationships already exist with these clinicians? If so, confirm they have the capability and interest to provide their services via telehealth.

Do you have specialty needs that aren’t adequately addressed in your community? Make sure the physicians whose services you request have both the capacity in their schedule and the willingness to meet your needs. Also, identify how staffing and productivity could be affected by the availability of these new services.

Local telehealth champions will help build enthusiasm, but it is important to identify a primary point of contact to handle questions relating to telehealth activities. This person will be involved in training, troubleshooting, scheduling, visiting with physicians, marketing and so forth.

Establishing telehealth services of any kind requires a learning curve. Make sure people have realistic expectations and are committed to working through the bumps along the way. Change is difficult, and telehealth brings about a level of change. Without someone to go to when questions arise, frustration with a changed process could stop progress cold.

Know Its Limitations

Because telehealth is not yet fully incorporated into the provision of health care, be aware of barriers to the delivery of clinical services. In order to be eligible for federal Medicare reimbursement, the telehealth event must occur from an appropriate originating site (physician/practitioner office, hospital, critical access hospital, rural health clinic, federal qualified health center); be provided by an appropriate provider (physician, nurse practitioner, physician assistant, nurse midwife, clinical nurse specialist, clinical psychologist, clinical social worker); use only certain Current Procedural Terminology billing codes; and primarily use two-way interactive audio and video telecommunications (except in Hawaii and Alaska, where store-and-forward technologies are allowed).

An originating site fee may also be billed at the patient site and is adjusted annually. Review the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services’ program memorandums for further details on Medicare reimbursement and additional code updates. While these regulations are significant, don’t view them as “stoppers.” Many services can still be provided, and paid for, within these constraints.

Reimbursement through states’ public assistance programs (e.g., Medicaid) varies. It is important to understand what your state allows in telehealth services. Additionally, many private payers are reimbursing for telehealth services, but this is not universal. Standard practice has been to notify your private payers, indicating your intent to bill for telehealth services and request any direction they may have.

Professional practice laws should be reviewed for the states your telehealth program will reach. State regulations vary. Make sure you know and comply with the state requirements for licensing and the credentialing requirements of your own organization and those with which your program will connect.
Ensure Lasting Impact

Time and effort spent specifically identifying how your telehealth program fits into and supports the ongoing mission and vision of your organization will not be wasted. One of the biggest indicators of the likelihood for a successful telehealth program is the level of institutional support within your organization. If telehealth is simply the “program du jour,” then the attention of staff, administrators and providers will easily shift to the next new thing.

Incorporating telehealth into the day-to-day activities of your organization will improve the probability that it will continue well into the future. Quality of life is important to the patients and the communities you serve, and telehealth positively impacts their ability to access the quality health services they deserve, regardless of their ZIP code.

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