

Memorable Moments

Telehealth Visits Result in Humorous, Touching Interactions

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As nursing homes, assisted living centers, and other long-term care facilities scrambled to protect our country's most vulnerable citizens during the COVID-19 outbreak last spring, telehealth technology stepped in to play a big role in routine and acute care as well as helping connect residents with loved ones.

Healthcare providers worked with their long-term care facility partners to find non-contact ways of delivering care, sharing medical and patient records, and using on-site nursing staff and other assistants to facilitate appointments. The same technology also helped serve as a channel to loved ones who were frequently barred from in-person visits during the height of the pandemic.

Although the telehealth technology was unfamiliar to many residents, it was often a welcomed addition to daily life within nursing facilities. Here are some touching and sometimes humorous stories that resulted.

Telehealth Opened, But Beauty Shop Closed

According to Margaret Brandt, CEO at St. Luke's Lutheran Care Center in Minnesota, the facility moved to telehealth options at the beginning of the pandemic to keep its residents safe. "When the residents had a doctor's appointment, we were initially quarantining them for 14 days each time," Brandt said. "We didn't want them to be stuck in their rooms for all that time."

Tessa Hawkins, a registered nurse at St. Luke's, helped facilitate many of the telehealth visits. "There was definitely some confusion at the beginning," Hawkins said. "Some of the residents would make funny faces at their doctors, and I'd have to explain that their doctor could see them. Some would be worried about their hair if the beauty shop happened to be closed that day. In general, it really boosted the moods of the residents to see and talk with their doctor."

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Faraway Family Invited to Medical Updates

St. Luke’s worked with United Hospital District (UHD) to connect its residents to UHD’s providers. Most of the telehealth visits were set up for routine check-ups. “We would pull together any medical records and physician orders we had on our end as well as any concerns that had come up from family or from our staff since the last visit,” Hawkins said. “All that would be sent to UHD beforehand so the doctor would have everything right there before the visit.”

One advantage of telehealth appointments was the ability for others to connect as needed. “We had one patient that was recovering from hip surgery, and when we did follow-up meetings with the surgeon, faraway family members were able to call in as well,” Hawkins said.



Photo description: United Hospital District lobby

Connecting With Relatives Brings Priceless Joy

Essentia Health in Minnesota was able to use donations through its foundation to purchase iPad equipment that allows long-term care residents to connect with family during the pandemic.

“While nothing can compare to face-to-face contact, we knew iPads could make families feel closer during quarantine and shelter-in-place orders,” said LeAnn Mouw, development director at the Essentia Health Foundation.

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Chaplain Kurt Jacobson offers spiritual care to a diverse population within Essentia facilities. Jacobson explains that for those in our long-term care communities, Zoom visits on the iPads have been key in improving residents' psychosocial well-being.

"A gentleman, who's a dad and grandpa, does an iPad visit every week," Jacobson said. "The smiles say it all when he gets to see his son, daughter-in-law, daughter, and grandsons. We have a mother who visits with her daughters. When she hears their voices and they say mom, occasionally there's a tear. It keeps that relationship with the family, which we've lacked during the pandemic."



Photo description: Essentia Health's Duluth Clinic

During a potential surge of COVID-19 patients, care teams plan to use the iPads for nurse or provider patient consults that don't require in-person interaction. Processes are also being created to support communication between care teams and families of patients with COVID-19 who cannot have visitors for safety reasons.

The technology is also being used to connect patients and hospital care teams with interpreters, social workers, and behavioral health professionals in some areas.

After facilitating Zoom visits on the iPads for more than 100 days, Jacobson recalls many joy-filled moments. One instance that comes to mind involves a resident who suffers from

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dementia. While he can't speak, he smiles when he sees his wife on the screen, and she tells him he's still handsome and that she loves him. "It's a tool worth every penny," says Jacobson. "I've seen it bring joy even in these most uncertain times to families."

Essentia Health leadership has been involved with the Great Plains Telehealth Resource & Assistance Center (gpTRAC) Program Advisory Council (PAC) for several years.

Support During a Resident's "Bad Month"

Although White River Health Care Center in South Dakota offers telehealth virtual visits for its physician rounds as well as for pastoral support when loved ones die, the facility has found it most useful for the mental health needs of its residents.

"Many of our residents would not have access to mental health services without telemedicine," explained Danielle Bechtold, MDS coordinator at White River Health Care Center. "We have one younger resident that has a particularly difficult time in December as she has lost her spouse and her grown children face life's challenges. She was able to open up during her virtual visit and get the help and support she needed."

Telehealth Increases Access for Rural Facilities

Villisca Good Samaritan in Iowa started a telehealth program about three years ago, focusing on providing counseling and psychiatry visits to its veterans.

"These services are not readily available in rural Iowa," said Amy Shipley, director of social services for Villisca Good Samaritan. "Telemedicine gives us greater access to specialists for our residents. It also means that they don't have to endure the process of getting ready to go to an in-person appointment and taking a long van ride. In-person visits could take an hour or two out of their day, and these are frail elderly individuals. It's much better to bring care into their home."

Other nursing homes, assisted living centers, and long-term care facilities experienced similar challenges during the global pandemic. As many stepped up to the challenge, partnering with local healthcare providers, they were able to take advantage of telehealth technology to bring routine and acute care, mental health services, and connection to loved ones as close as possible in a safe and appreciated way.