10 Things You Need to Know About How to Build a Better Telehealth Platform Amid COVID-19 Uncertainty

Everyone acknowledges that telehealth has seen a significant transformation since Covid-19 became a household name in early 2020. Virtually every provider scrambled overnight to figure out how to offer telehealth to more patients across a broader set of care conditions than they previously provided. At the same time, many patients considered for the first time using telehealth as an acceptable alternative to in-person visits or even worse, they delayed seeking urgent medical care due to concerns about contracting the coronavirus (and, often times made their health worse by not receiving care right away). So, looking forward amidst all this chaos, what are the most important things you need to know about building a telehealth platform that will attract patients and meet expectations of all users?

#1	The perfect storm created readiness in the market for telehealth
#2	Historical data for telehealth and virtual care are obsolete
#3	Spending could grow to $250 billion a year for virtual and remote care
#4	Incorporating telehealth in your overall strategy will be critical to future growth
#5	Virtual care must be seamlessly integrated with traditional care
#6	Patients will place more value on convenience and timeliness of access
#7	Technology-enabled partnerships may provide distinctive value to patients
#8	Deterrents to growth require close examination
#9	One-size telehealth service does not fit all health systems
#10	5 Actions every health system should consider

#1: The perfect storm created readiness in the market for telehealth

Three things created readiness for telehealth in the market. First, there has been a big jump in digital health popularity given the availability of video conferencing and the ability of consumers to monitor and record his/her own health data. Second, Covid-19 created an overwhelming interest in telehealth as a natural alternative care delivery method with the benefit of limiting exposure and viral spread. Third, in response to Covid-19, many governing bodies relaxed their strict telehealth regulations. Most notably, CMS created a more favorable reimbursement schedule and approved 80 new telehealth services HHS waived originating site requirements and states waived licensing restrictions[i].

 ➢ Implications: The market is now poised to support an ongoing telehealth industry both in terms of technology and readiness

#2: Historical data for telehealth and virtual care are obsolete

When it comes to predicting the future of telehealth utilization using historical data, neither previously recorded volume nor reimbursement trend data provide valid predictors because everything looks so vastly different since the onset of Covid-19. Any analysis of features and processes based on prior telehealth operations are very likely insufficient to understand how to build out a telehealth system in the future.

 ➢ Implications: This requires a rigorous and quantitative approach to assessing the future potential of telehealth, understanding priorities, and determining where to invest for growth to meet market wants, needs, and expectations.

#3: Spending could grow to $250 billion a year for virtual and remote care

According to several sources[refs ii, iii], virtual and remote care spending could grow to $250 billion a year as Covid creates a new avenue for care. Mckinsey[iv] specifically estimated all the virtual or near-virtual alternatives for urgent care, office visits, home health services, and tech-enabled home medication administration that could be substitutions for traditional modes of care (estimated at ~20% of all Medicare, Medicaid, and Commercial outpatient visits, office, and home health spend that could be potentially be virtualized).

> ➢ Implications: Investing in telehealth is both an opportunity and a priority (but also a risk if you do not invest wisely – or worse yet, if you don't invest at all).

#4: Including telehealth in your overall strategy will be critical to future growth

Beyond just providing virtual care during a time of Covid-19, Beebe Healthcare CEO, Dr. David Tam said in an interview with Becker's[v] that they view telemedicine as an important mode for serving the community by improving their ability to get secondary services to remote areas and ultimately see more patients. This includes testing, imaging, hospital-at-home services, and other ancillary services. Beebe Healthcare CEO also points out that "it's a new paradigm for community healthcare organizations that have struggled because they could not necessarily compete with the healthcare organizations in metro areas … it will change the paradigm of what mergers and acquisitions look like in the future to growth of large organizations."

In another recent article[vi] KPMG suggests similar opinions, indicating that some drivers of M&A activity include: new market expansion, access to patients, expanded share of wallet, and new clinical capabilities. All of this suggests the importance of telehealth and a redirection in growth strategy priorities post-Covid-19.

> ➢ Implications: Not providing a telehealth option to patients and referring physicians may drive volume to your competitors, make your health system less attractive as a partner or acquisition target, or limit your ability to grow independently.

#5: Virtual care must be seamlessly integrated with traditional care

In their recent article[vii], KPMG also emphasized in their article, 'Healthcare Providers: A Break in the Clouds,' (2020), that telehealth must be seamlessly integrated with traditional, in-person care. They continue to suggest that "healthcare organizations can use real-time analytics, predictive modelling, wearable devices, and mobile health apps to help chronic disease patients better manage their symptoms between visits and delay their disease progression." Strategies developed that focus on end-to-end care will be critical to health systems having better medical outcomes, higher patient and physician satisfaction, and a more efficient health system.

> ➢ Implications: For safety and better outcomes, it is critical to have a fully-integrated virtual and traditional care model. This is especially important for the high risk, complicated, and chronic condition patients.

#6: Patients will place more value on convenience and timeliness of access than previously

Review of MII's research over the past decade clearly shows that consumers have become much more concerned with access (convenience to physically get to the provider, ease of scheduling an appointment, timeliness of communication and channels for connecting with the provider, wait time before getting in to see a provider, etc.). We also see a significant increase in consumer price sensitivity for more mainstream care (e.g., MRI, elective surgery). This suggests that healthcare is becoming more of a consumer-driven market (vs. a physician-driven market where patients traditionally followed the lead of their PCP or specialist).

➢ Implications: It is not enough to just invest in telehealth! It is important to know WHERE to invest resources by understanding the value patients and referring physicians place on convenience and timeliness and how you can meet their needs and expectations.

#7: Technology-enabled partnerships may provide distinctive value to patients

Should you build, buy, or partner virtual health technology? KPMG[viii] emphasizes the importance of this question and suggests that telehealth must be seamlessly integrated with traditional, in-person care. This will ensure better outcomes, cost management, and higher levels of efficiency.

➢ Implications: Once you understand what your patients and referring physicians value and how to meet their needs, look for technology partners that can offer unique and value-added experiences coming out of the pandemic (think about different opportunities to create "contact free" touchpoints), seamless integration, and consumer analytics.

#8: Deterrents to growth require close examination

Many providers worry about consumer awareness of available telehealth offerings, concerns about what services are best suited for the medium, and what insurance will cover. Addressing these patient concerns requires expert and timely communication to address this early (physician to physician, physician to patient, health system to the market).

Sage Growth Partners' suggested recently[ix] that physicians across all specialties are most concerned with: #1) lack of integration/interoperability, #2) lack of sufficient data for care continuity, #3) reimbursement or payment parity, and #4) multiple technologies creating too much useless data. In addition, providers are also concerned about data security and workflow integration[x, xi, xii]. Understanding physicians' anticipated challenges means working as a team to address these before expanding or improving your telehealth service.

➢ Implications: Knowing barriers to telehealth growth means your organization can find solutions to overcome critical barriers and address them through operational processes and technology-enabled systems

#9: One-size telehealth service does not fit all health systems

Keep in mind that different size health systems and different areas of care will have varying needs and applicability in terms of telehealth. Sage Growth Partners[xiii] present study findings showing that approximately two-thirds of primary care, behavioral health, and medical specialties are providing telehealth services. However, only a quarter of surgical specialties can use telehealth given the nature of care.   This is also highly correlated with physicians' satisfaction with telehealth

McKinsey[xiv] complements Sage Growth Partners findings by suggesting 5 models for virtual or virtually-enabled non-acute care:
1) On-demand virtual urgent care as alternative to ED visits, urgent care visits, and after-hours consultations
2) Virtual office visits with an established provider for consults (that do not require physical exams or concurrent procedures)
3) Near-virtual office visits for patients to access care outside a provider's office – testing, immunizations
4) Virtual home health services leverage virtual visits, remote monitoring, and digital patient engagement tools
5) Tech-enabled home medication administration to shift some infusible and injectable drugs from the clinic to the home

➢ Implications: Think carefully about the strategy of your health system and where the growth is likely to occur. Invest wisely in the future opportunity – not just for today.

#10: The 5 most important actions every health system should consider

Many thought leaders, including MII, McKinsey and Oliver Wyman[xv], have overlapping ideas about what actions health systems should consider:
(1) Embrace the new "front door" and develop plans to integrate it into your delivery system as soon as possible
(2) Segment both your patient and external referring physician populations to develop tailored experiences, improve outcomes for priority patient populations
(3) Support virtual care by building capabilities and incentives of the provider workforce – e.g. develop technology partnership, improve information exchanges, broaden access and integration of technology
(4) Take a data-driven perspective to value virtual care and prioritize improvements and investments - e.g. clinical outcomes, access improvement, patient/provider satisfaction
(5) Develop strategies that go beyond telehealth/clinic visit replacement to drive growth in new markets and populations and scale other applications – e.g. second opinions and specialty consults.

➢ Implications: Understanding the market and developing new-age strategies requires a much more data analytic approach in addition to behavioral research to understand the current and future market (risks and potential opportunities).

Through our partnership, Market Innovations, Inc. and HIDI can help your health system navigate these uncharted territories through our unique and deep quantitative behavioral economics approach to assess the market – i.e. understand what patients and physicians value in the market today and what they will in the future when it comes to your telehealth services. Our models and methods help bridge the gap from data to information, forming actionable intelligence for leaders to use in terms of strategy, operations, partnerships, pricing, and market expansion.

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[vi] Sheidy, D., Nelson, R., & Whitcomb, J. (2020). Healthcare Providers: a Break in the Clouds. KMPG.

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[viii] Sheidy, D., Nelson, R., & Whitcomb, J.

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[xii] Sheidy, D., Nelson, R., & Whitcomb, J.

[xiii] Sage Growth Partners.

[xiv] Sheidy, D., Nelson, R., & Whitcomb, J.

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