Telehealth Improves Access to Care, Patient Satisfaction and Productivity - Lessons Learned from COVID

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Telehealth emerged as an optimal platform to provide medical and mental health services at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. Medical and mental health providers quickly transitioned to HIPAA compliant virtual platforms to provide needed services while minimizing virus exposure and spread. This study examined access and quality of care provided by medical and mental health practitioners at an outpatient pain management clinic using Epic Amwell and Doximity virtual platforms for the April 2020-December 2020 period, as compared to traditional in person visits during the same period the year prior (April 2019-December 2019). For patients with low digital literacy or connectivity issues, audio-only phone visits were utilized. Press-Ganey patient satisfaction, appointment attendance, and charges/relative value units (RVU) were compared. Patient satisfaction ratings improved by 2.5% for the entire clinic using telehealth, from 90.8% to 93.3%. Appointment attendance increased by 42% (p<.05) and No Shows decreased by 28% (p<.05) for Pain Psychology using telehealth, reflective of improved access and greater need for mental health support during the pandemic. Pain Psychology opened extra appointments to accommodate additional need. Pain Psychology RVUs increased by 28% (p<.05) and charges increased by 24% (p<.05), reflective of greater productivity using telehealth. Physicians were not granted billing parity for virtual visits; whereas appointment attendance remained consistent, reimbursement decreased using telehealth despite improvement in patient satisfaction. Overall, results showed improved patient satisfaction, appointment attendance, and access to care, and increased productivity with telehealth. Implications for policy change and future considerations for telehealth will be discussed.

Keywords: telehealth, telemedicine, pain management, access to care, patient satisfaction, productivity