

## **For Telehealth to Keep Growing, Tech Access, Reimbursement Issues Need to be Ironed Out**

The pandemic has overwhelmingly converted health care providers to offering telemedicine, and that trend is expected to continue next year and beyond, according to a new report from PwC that was published today. However, existing challenges need to be addressed to ensure the equitable and successful growth of telehealth programs.

As telehealth services become more sophisticated, there is the risk of alienating lower-income communities that lack access to technology, according to the PwC Health Research Institute's Top Health Industries Issues report.

"It is important for a physician network to ensure it is not creating more inequities as it is building up its telehealth programs," said Karen Young, U.S. health industry leader at PwC.

At Somos, a network of about 2,500 providers in the city, Dr. Ramon Tallaj, chairman, said the organization adopted wider telehealth services during the spring. But not all patients have the capability of undertaking live video visits as some might not have the phone or internet capabilities to do so, he said.

To overcome that, it is important to consider other modalities of telehealth as well, such as voice calls, Tallaj said. The report also identified partnering with community-based organizations and technology companies to improve access to smartphones and tablets.

In addition to unequal access to technology, patients had differing levels of digital literacy in navigating services. Beyond seeking the assistance of family members to learn how to use the tools and forming partnerships with community-based organizations for education programs, that issue remains challenging to address, Tallaj said.

Different ethnic groups have had varied experiences with telehealth during the pandemic, so it is likely some patient groups might be less willing to engage with telemedicine in the future, Young said. The Hispanic community, for example, was found to have encountered more problems interacting with telehealth throughout the course of the pandemic so far and have been least willing to embrace telehealth service, Young said.

On the provider side, uncertainties remain over reimbursement parity for telehealth services.

"It's going to be hard to convince physicians to use these tools widely if there's no guarantee they'll continue to be reimbursed at the same rate," Young said.

The report found that of the 153 health service provider executives surveyed, 52% called their reimbursement concerns significant. There needs to be action at all levels, from providers to the government, Young said.

It is also important to consider continuity of care and follow-up services following a telehealth visit. As physicians saw patients virtually early in the pandemic, ancillary services such as blood work were disrupted,

Tallaj said. That pain point resulted in a drop in patient retention, and 40% of providers noted this concern as significant, according to the report.

To get around that, Somos created a service that would go to the patient to collect samples for lab work, Tallaj said, adding that sometimes the solution for telehealth issues was leveraging existing resources.

Telehealth still has much opportunities to grow next year, but unless existing pain points are addressed, it will not be implemented to its best potential, Young said.