

# A First Look at Attitudes Surrounding Telehealth:

Findings from a national survey taking a first look at attitudes, usage, and beliefs of family physicians in the U.S. towards telehealth.

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## OVERVIEW

Telehealth is an important part of patient-centered care and holds tremendous promise as another tool to improve quality and affordability in health care. Telehealth is frequently cited as a potential strategy to enhance access and care.<sup>1</sup>

The Robert Graham Center, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and Anthem conducted the first survey that gauges the attitudes and beliefs of primary care physicians towards the use of telemedicine. The findings from this survey confirm that family physicians see promise in the ability of telehealth to improve access to primary care services and suggest that telehealth is on the cusp of advancing from a tool used occasionally to a tool that is routinely implemented. However, use of telehealth services will not become widely adopted until health systems are reformed to address barriers. Specifically, practice training and support needs to be reformed to include telehealth education, technological platforms need to be updated with tools to support telehealth, reimbursement for telehealth services needs to be expanded, and licensing and credentialing needs to be clarified to allow for interstate provision of telehealth services.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Telehealth is the use of medical information exchanged from one location to another via electronic communications to improve a patient's health. In this report the terms telemedicine and telehealth are used interchangeably. With common telecommunication devices found in most homes, health information can be transmitted to healthcare providers for analysis to help with diagnosis and treatment. Using smartphones, email, two-way video, and other tools, clinicians can now deliver remote clinical care to the homebound, chronically ill, those who reside in rural areas, and those who prefer the convenience of access to telehealth services. Via telehealth services, clinicians can deliver care more easily after normal business hours, monitor patient vital signs remotely, and conduct consultations with specialists and other providers.

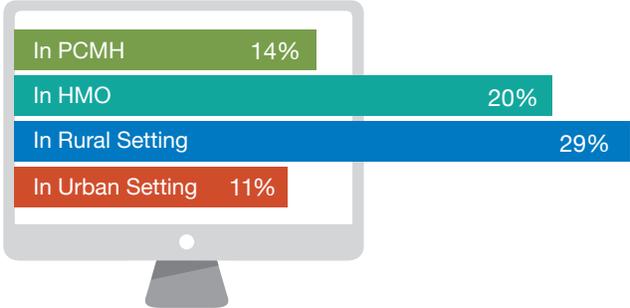
METHODOLOGY

Surveys were mailed to over 5,000 randomly selected family physicians soliciting answers to 30 questions focused on (1) physician characteristics, (2) practice characteristics, (3) attitudes towards telehealth and barriers to using telehealth, (4) use of telehealth among telehealth users, and (5) beliefs about telehealth with separate sections for users and non-users. A total of 1,557 family physicians responded to the survey with 15% indicating that they use telehealth in their practices — a statistically significant percentage.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Results from the survey revealed that physicians who practice in rural areas are more likely to use telehealth than those who practice in urban areas (29% vs. 11%). Additionally, physicians who use telehealth are younger and have been in practice for fewer than 10 years. Almost 98% of telehealth users reported that they use Electronic Health Records (EHR) in providing care to their patients, compared to 92% of non-users. The survey also found that telehealth users are more likely to provide obstetrical, emergency room, and major procedural care than non-users.

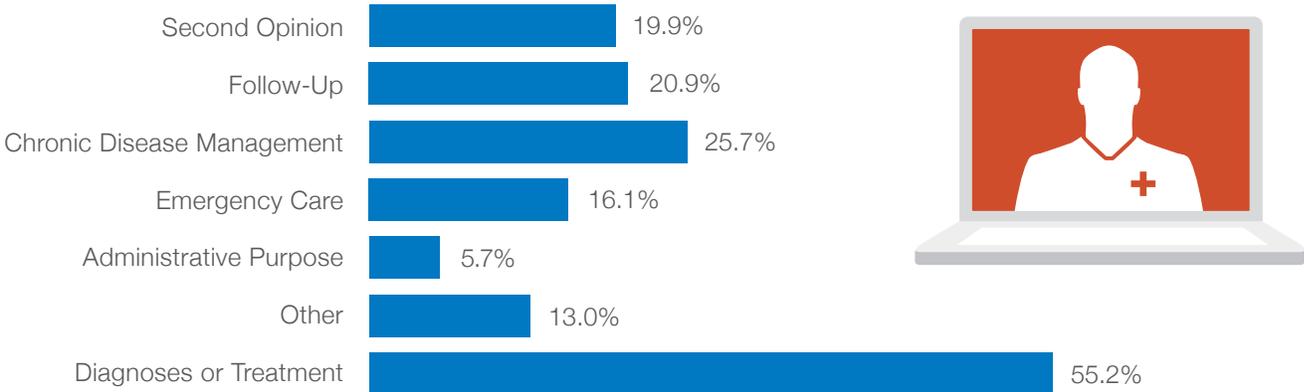
Incidence of Telehealth Use by Family Physicians



Physicians who practiced in rural areas were more likely to use telehealth than those who practiced in urban areas

Both users and non-users of telehealth services agree that they would use telehealth to connect patients to specialists. However, non-users are more likely than users to perceive a higher quality of care when patients see a physician in person and are also more likely to view telehealth as an inefficient use of their time.

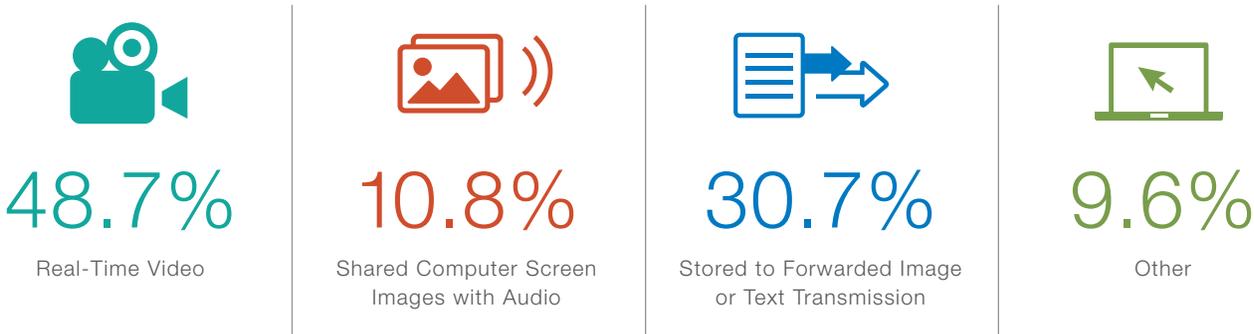
### Percent of Telehealth Users Who Use Telehealth For:



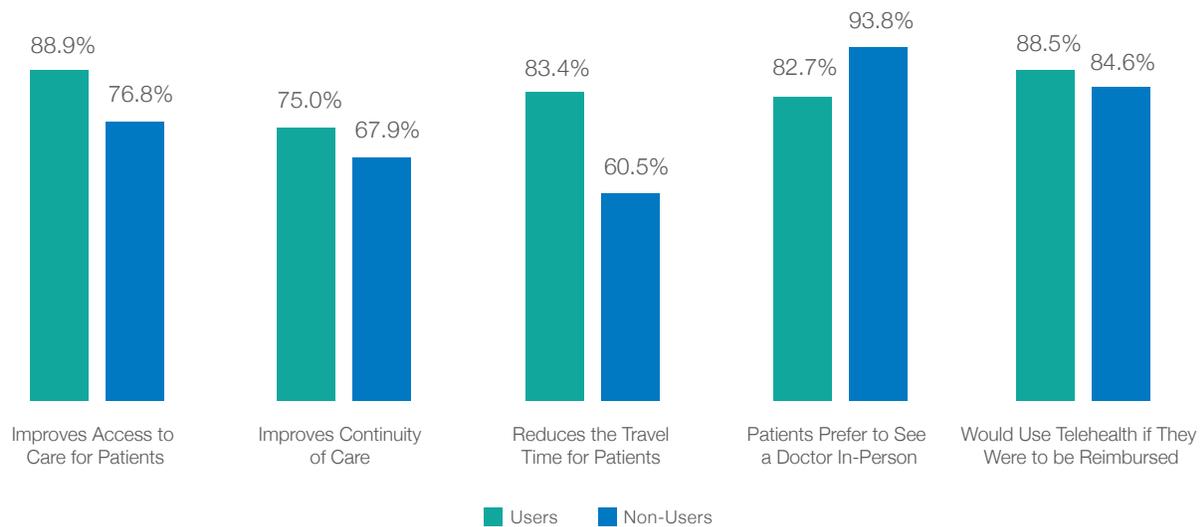
While attitudes and perceptions tended to differ between users and non-users of telehealth services, beliefs about the value of telehealth among users and non-users tended to overlap. In general, both users and non-users believe that telehealth has the potential to improve access to care, improve continuity, and decrease travel time for patients. The majority of respondents agree that patients prefer to see their physicians face-to-face, but recognize that telehealth may represent an alternative to not seeing a physician at all.

Among users of telehealth services, over half report using telehealth one to five times over the past year and 23% report using telehealth more than 20 times in the past year. Additionally, almost half of users stated that they had used telehealth in the form of real-time video in the past 12 months.

### Use of Telehealth Involved:



## Beliefs Among Users and Non-Users Surrounding the Use of Telehealth



A number of factors account for resistance to full-scale adoption of telehealth services and present opportunities for expansion of the use of telehealth services. Given the increase in patients seeking healthcare in settings outside of the traditional office visit, such as urgent care facilities and retail clinic sites, there is clearly a need for more widespread implementation of telehealth services. Telehealth can provide an avenue to meet the desires and needs of individuals who are seeking care outside of traditional office visits.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Given the call for increased access to healthcare services outside of a traditional office based visit, as well as the urgent need to provide care for individuals who may not have ready access to a clinician, increasing the availability and usage of telehealth services is essential. There are a variety of barriers that must be overcome before telehealth services can become a routine tool for primary care clinicians, including creating guidelines for the use of telehealth services in clinical practice, definitions of quality, and measurable outcomes. Additionally, healthcare clinicians and users need assurance that the patient's privacy is protected and their health information is secure. Payment is another major barrier that must be overcome, and standardized reimbursement procedures need to be established. Administrative issues that clinicians face and must be addressed in using and billing for telehealth services include a lack of billing codes, a lack of reimbursement mechanisms, licensing and credentialing barriers, and appropriate training in the use of telehealth services.

Pilot and demonstration programs should be established on a national level to create the knowledge base necessary to assure that telehealth services meet, or potentially exceed, the current standards of care for access and quality.

## The Importance of Telehealth in Rural Areas:

Patients in rural health settings face unique needs and challenges that differentiate them from patients in an urban setting. Only about 10 percent of physicians practice in rural America, despite the fact that nearly 20 percent of our population lives in these areas.<sup>5</sup> Difficulties in recruiting and retaining health care providers has resulted in longstanding disparities in the rural and urban physician supply.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) has a stated “Triple Aim” goal, focused on enhancing the patient experience, improving population health, and controlling healthcare costs. In an effort to improve access to care for rural Americans, telehealth networks are increasingly being used to connect patients and providers in different locations using a unique set of tools fueled by technology.

While the ACA created programs to strengthen the health care workforce, rural communities are likely to continue experiencing provider shortages and inadequate access to care. Research shows that telehealth services have the potential to alter the practice of medicine and provide an opportunity to help ameliorate access issues. Equipped in many ways to serve rural health needs, telehealth services may help patients and their primary care physicians overcome logistical hurdles to achieving the continuity and coordination of care that are among the cornerstones of primary care’s positive impact on health.<sup>6</sup>

Results from the Robert Graham survey of primary care physicians reveals that physicians in rural areas are more likely to use telehealth than those who practice in urban areas (29% vs. 11%). Unfortunately, this survey confirms that although there is a need for telehealth services in rural communities, these services are still not being utilized routinely by primary care physicians in these communities. The urgency of a systematic approach to the provision and payment of telehealth services across states is an important and timely issue, which should be addressed at a national level by relevant stakeholders such as professional organizations, patient advocates, payers, and government entities.

### SUMMARY

The groundbreaking survey conducted by the Robert Graham Center, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and Anthem illustrates that telehealth services are rapidly growing tools that primary care physicians can use to address the need for increased access to healthcare. Telehealth has the potential to alter the entire practice of medicine, just as the home computer and smartphones have altered information exchange and communication worldwide. While telehealth services remain in the early stages of implementation, the findings from this survey are an important step toward identifying the important issues facing clinicians entering into this new realm of healthcare delivery. Furthermore, the survey provides guidance for policymakers regarding where pressure points and levers can be deployed to move the use of telehealth services from occasional use to routine implementation.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “Telehealth services: rural health fact sheet series,” Department of Health and Human Services, Fact sheet, Dec. 2012.
- 2 Kvedar J, Coye MJ, Everett W. Connected Health: A Review of Technologies and Strategies to Improve Patient Care with Telemedicine and Telehealth. *Health Aff.* February 2014, 33:2194-9.
- 3 State Coverage for Telehealth Services, (Updated January 2014) National Conference of State Legislatures. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-coverage-for-telehealth-services.aspx> Accessed June 1, 2015.
- 4 Telehealth and Medicare: Payment Policy, Current Use, and Prospects for Growth *Medicare Medicaid Res Rev.* 2013; 3(4): mmrr.003.04.a04.
- 5 Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “Telehealth services: rural health fact sheet series,” Department of Health and Human Services, Fact sheet, Dec. 2012.
- 6 What Is Telemedicine? American Telemedicine Association. <http://www.americantelemed.org/about-telemedicine/what-is-telemedicine#.VW8ZAKakaB0> Accessed June 1, 2015.