

The Future of Telehealth Is Closer Than You Think

By Dan Trencher

Recently, as part of a panel discussion, I was asked the deceptively simple question, “What does the future of Telehealth look like?”

In the world of technology we like to think forward about “what’s possible?”. But let’s face it. There is never anything simple about predicting the future, let alone the future of healthcare.

But as I was driving, I realized the answer was literally staring me in the face (and talking to me as I drove).

Many seasoned business travelers may remember back when a paper map and road atlas were necessities for planning a route on a business trip. You then frantically tried to read that map while holding the wheel with one hand. When you were hungry for lunch, you stumbled into whatever chain restaurant you saw by the side of the road.

Technology has fundamentally changed the travel experience, with smartphones now able to deduce where you are headed based on your calendar entries, talk you through directions turn by turn, avoid traffic, and recommend highly rated local restaurants. Or you can skip the drive and get picked up wherever you are at the tap of a button.

Back to healthcare. We are well on our way to seeing an analogous change in how we as patients, and consumers, experience healthcare – the creation of an Integrated Virtual Tele-Health Ecosystem, including the following areas:

- 1. Expanded Primary & Specialty Care Access** – When Teladoc launched the telehealth market we focused initially on services for common, acute conditions. We then expanded into specialties like Behavioral Health and Dermatology — both a natural fit for telehealth. What’s next? Integrated telehealth experiences that include a range of specialists, screenings/testing, pharmacists, and other non-physician providers who are integral to managing chronic conditions like diabetes and congestive heart failure (CHF).

- 2. Connected Devices & Wearables** – While healthcare saw a burst of activity around the Apple HealthKit and wearables such as Fitbit, we are still in the very early stages of *meaningful device* connectivity in healthcare. Meaningful connectivity like the Kinsa smart thermometer, for example, is not only clinically relevant, enabling providers to have a longitudinal view on a patient’s temperature for up to 10 days, but it’s affordable and consumer-centric, enabling ubiquitous access. The future will include more devices with this balance of clinical and consumer benefit, such as seamless integration with home testing devices (e.g., blood glucose readers), multi-function diagnostic devices, and biosensors that will bring an Internet of Things (IoT) experience to remote patient monitoring, chronic condition support, and health improvement.
- 3. Ubiquitous Entry Points** – If technology can turn on your lights and help you order online, why shouldn’t it help you communicate with a healthcare provider? As rapidly as consumers have migrated from web to mobile platforms for digital healthcare, new access points are already emerging in the form of voice-based systems like Amazon Echo, interactive TV interfaces like Roku, smart watches, and yes, even smart cars. Soon you will be able to request a physician consult without lifting a finger.
- 4. Integration with the Broader Healthcare Ecosystem** – As we move forward, telehealth integration will be woven into the fabric of how healthcare is delivered. Teladoc already has implemented bi-directional exchange of clinical data with EHR systems, and can “tier” provider networks to incorporate a health system’s own physicians, with our physician network wrapping around to ensure 24/7 access. Provider referrals and real time scheduling integration, as well as value added features such as built-in formulary compliance and automatically presenting patients with savings opportunities on the prescription drugs they take will be the standard in the future.

Very akin to how technology has improved the travel experience, technology enabled – the right way – will provide a new kind of healthcare experience. One with better convenience, quality and value. In many ways, the future of telehealth is here.

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