

Telehealth: Enhancing workflows and optimizing care

Written by Lee Horner, President, Stratus Video | May 24, 2017

Hospitals increasingly seek to redesign their workflow in order to better utilize their resources.

A typical redesign tends to be backward-looking as hospitals focus on identifying and reducing how much time and money were expended in departmental processes. In these situations, the resulting workflow redesign can be categorized as a cost reduction strategy; the workflow's objectives are more financially-driven vs. patient-focused.

Regardless of the various ways (and words) used by hospitals in defining their vision and mission, delivering quality patient care is the overarching objective for any hospital. As a result, a workflow should be assessed from the perspective of care vs. cost. If resource utilization is viewed as an investment vs. an expense in providing care, the resulting workflow redesign would be categorized as a care optimization strategy vs. a cost reduction strategy.

Telehealth can help hospitals evolve and enhance their existing workflows, resulting in more efficient and effective patient care. By integrating telehealth within existing workflows, hospitals can better align a department's roles and processes to the overall goal of optimized patient care.

Quicker access and improved coordination at various patient touchpoints are recognized as key benefits of telehealth. In an urgent care situation, telehealth is increasingly being used by providers to provide more efficient and effective care within the Emergency Department's existing workflow. By being able to quickly access a specialist for a virtual consult, providers minimize spending valuable time trying to first, identify an available specialist, and second, determine the best way to reach the available specialist. In one example, a patient may need to remain in the ED for up to seven hours before a behavioral health specialist is available to provide an in-person consult. If admitted on Friday evening or during the weekend, the patient's length of stay can unfortunately increase to three days as the medical staff waits for a specialist to arrive at the facility for the consult.

With telehealth, the existing ED workflow can be evolved to enhance access and drive collaboration between onsite providers and offsite specialists. Providers will still need to be able to access an on-call specialist; an on-call specialist will still need to be able to provide a consult. However, the time to reach a specialist for a consult can be reduced significantly. Minutes or hours which staff typically spends in trying to reach a specialist

are saved. The response time is also reduced as a specialist can provide an immediate consult from anywhere and on any device. Decisions as to whether the patient needs to be admitted, transferred or discharged can be made within minutes vs. hours or days. The costs involved with keeping a patient in the ED are contained, as the hours or days which a patient spends in the ED are minimized as much as possible. As hospitals struggle with being able to have multiple specialists (such as behavioral health resources) on-hand at any time, telehealth can enable a hospital to leverage specialists within network to support their patient care objectives around-the-clock.

Improved productivity and greater flexibility in providing follow-up care are additional key benefits of telehealth. For post-discharge care, telehealth is increasingly being used by specialists and case managers to provide more efficient and effective care within each department's existing workflow.

For example, a cancer specialist may need to drive hours to reach a facility for follow-up patient appointments. With telehealth, this specialist can convert windshield time into patient time. Instead of expending hours driving to/from other facilities, the specialist can invest these hours in seeing more patients. A specialist may be able to see a double-digit percentage increase in the number of patients in one's care by using telehealth to provide patient care. As hospitals struggle with being able to expand their reach into a community, telehealth can enable a hospital to connect patients with specialists, regardless of distance.

In another example, a case manager needs to regularly follow-up with a discharged patient to ensure adherence to a treatment plan. With telehealth, this case manager can engage the patient when the patient is most receptive to the care, in the comfort and convenience of the patient's home. During the virtual visit, the case manager has the opportunity to reinforce the treatment plan, answer questions and reach other care team members in real-time to provide support, especially on the topic of medication reconciliation. As hospitals struggle to minimize readmissions, telehealth can enable a hospital to better align staffing resources (numbers, timing and approach) against those patients who are at the greatest risk of readmission.

Patient care which has been optimized means that the timing and quality of care has been delivered efficiently and effectively. By examining when and how to integrate telehealth into existing workflows, a hospital can deliver greater satisfaction to patients, providers and specialists at every step of the patient journey.

Author Bio: As President of Stratus Video's telehealth division, Lee Horner brings more than 25 years of experience in enterprise software and health care IT industry. Prior to joining Stratus Video, Horner served as the president of CareCloud, a health care technology company specializing in practice management and EHR software. Horner works to leverage Stratus Video's years of development around the ease of use technology to provide telehealth solutions for every area of healthcare.

<http://www.beckershospitalreview.com/healthcare-information-technology/telehealth-enhancing-workflows-and-optimizing-care.html>