HIM's Role in Telemedicine and Telehealth Technology

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Informatics, according to AHIMA's newly developed definition, "is a collaborative activity that involves people, processes, and technologies to produce and use trusted data for better decision making."[1] Health information management (HIM) professionals have an increasing opportunity in this ever-growing informatics field to assist with documentation requirements, data integrity, billing, privacy and security, and technology needs.

Telemedicine and telehealth are two such collaborative approaches that involve all three facets of informatics—people, processes, and technology. Telemedicine has been defined in an AHIMA Practice Brief as the "telecommunications systems that link healthcare organizations and patients from diverse geographic locations and transmit text, data, and images for (clinical) consultation and treatment."[2]

Telehealth is defined by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the Department of Health and Human Services as "the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support and promote long-distance clinical healthcare, patient and professional health-related education, public health, and health administration."[3] Technologies include videoconferencing, the internet, store-and-forward imaging, streaming media, and terrestrial and wireless communications.[4]

With the shift away from fee-for-service payment systems toward value-based care, the demand for medicine delivered through innovative technologies such as telemedicine and telehealth is growing.

Telemedicine benefits the "people" in the informatics definition (i.e., the healthcare consumers) through decreased need to travel for specialty care, reduced time away from work, increased access to specialty and subspecialty health services, and the ability to schedule care that fits the patient's schedule and needs. In addition, the clinicians providing care benefit by being able to travel less to different offices in multiple geographic locations.

Technical and Ethical Considerations in Tele-services

One application of telemedicine is telehealth visits. Telehealth visits are a form of office visits in which telemedicine technology is used for the patient to have an audio and video interaction with a specialty physician—typically one who does not have an office location in the patient's geographic area. For example, a primary physician office in a rural area may provide clinic space on an occasional or even regular basis to allow a physician from outside the geographical area to provide telehealth visits to patients who need specialty care but cannot or prefer not to travel to the physician's main clinical location.

Telehealth services can assist specialists and geographically distant clinicians in monitoring chronic conditions, which may help with early intervention or prevention of exacerbations, thus preventing hospital admissions or readmissions.

In a 2017 study published in the *Annals of Family Medicine*, the authors reported that "patients identified convenience, efficiency, communication, privacy, and comfort as domains that are potentially important to consider when assessing video visits versus in-person encounters."[5]

In keeping with the definition of informatics, telemedicine and telehealth bring with their implementation a variety of processes. As with all technologically driven processes in healthcare, HIM professionals may be presented with challenges in managing the records created as a result of telemedicine visits and telehealth services. Ensuring the records are an accurate reflection of the clinical visit, timely completion of the documentation, and the ability to bill and collect payment for the services are important roles for HIM professionals in organizations where these services are offered. HIM professionals must be involved in the decisions concerning how healthcare data is collected, shared, and stored.

To ensure integrity of the health record, it's important that HIM professionals consistently capture accurate patient registration data, such as demographic and insurance information, during telehealth and telemedicine encounters.

Finally, a variety of technologies are brought into play in the delivery of telemedicine and telehealth services for use by the provider and the patient. If the patient is being seen via a telemedicine visit at a remote healthcare site, the patient should be provided with instructions on how to operate any videoconferencing equipment. Patients and caregivers should also be trained on technologies used for telehealth services in a home setting.

However, the use of the Internet and smartphone apps have helped eliminate the need, in some cases, for special equipment or travel. More sophisticated mobile technologies are being made available at a reasonable cost on tablets and smartphones, giving consumers better access to them. The result is growing demand for all types of telemedicine and telehealth services.

Ethical concerns should be addressed to assist the patient in ensuring the privacy and security of their health information, especially when using unsecured internet connections or unencrypted mobile apps. HIM professionals can educate consumers and clinicians on the privacy and security risks involved in using some of these technologies, and provide training on ways to make them more secure.

Though no informatics technology is perfect, telemedicine and telehealth are increasingly being viewed as positive and convenient treatment options. When used appropriately, this technology can save both clinicians and healthcare consumers a lot of time and money.

With the increasing costs of healthcare and the fact that medical care options may be limited in some geographic locations, the demand for telemedicine and telehealth continues to increase. It may not be a viable option for every consumer or every medical condition, but the pros often outweigh the cons for many patients and providers.

The ability for patients to receive medical care, health monitoring, medical advice, and responses to follow-up questions from the comfort of their own home makes telemedicine and telehealth attractive alternatives to traditional care.

Notes

[1] AHIMA. "Informatics and Data Analytics Overview."

[2] AHIMA Practice Brief. "Telemedicine Services and the Health Record (2013 update)." May 2013.

[3] Health Resources and Services Administration Federal Office of Rural Health Policy. "Telehealth Programs."

[4] Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT. "What is Telehealth?"

[5] Powell, Rhea E. et al. "Patient Perceptions of Telehealth Primary Care Video Visits." *Annals of Family Medicine* 15, no. 3 (May/June 2017): 225-229.

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