

Send in the (Potentially Life-Saving) Drones

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None of the incredible advances in medical technology or pharmacology are any good if they're inaccessible to people who need them the most. But that's exactly what's happening in rural Appalachia, especially in southwestern Virginia's economically depressed coal counties, where large swaths of the population are poor, underemployed, uninsured, and also geographically isolated from treatment facilities.

In an attempt to bring cutting-edge healthcare directly to these remote areas, a nonprofit healthcare organization called Health Wagon serves this community through mobile health clinics (large RVs equipped with diagnostic equipment and medical supplies) and two stationary clinics in a six-county area where 43 percent of the population is below the federal poverty level.

In the summer of 2015, Health Wagon gained approval from the Federal Aviation Administration, with help from Virginia Tech and other partners, to test the delivery of medications using a six-rotor drone, which flew packaged medications to a rural outreach clinic.

From there pharmacists were able to distribute the medications to the patients who needed them. Health Wagon Executive Director Dr. Teresa Gardner, DNP, FNP-BC, FAANP, detailed the test run in the publication [Clinical Advisor](#), and stressed the importance of delivering critical medications to hard to reach areas. When her part of Virginia got 43 inches of snow one year, the National Guard was dispatched to deliver insulin to diabetics who needed it, she wrote.

Although the drone delivery was a one-time event, Gardner told the *Journal of AHIMA* that she'd like to see the government's ban on drones for commercial use overturned to meet the needs of her patients. If that day happens, health information management professionals may find themselves developing privacy policies to protect patient privacy during deliveries. Gardner would like to see drones deliver medication directly to the patient's home. Yet that could open up privacy breach concerns if, say, the drone accidentally dropped a package containing medicine bottles listing a patient's name and other protected health information.

"The technology has evolved but the utility hasn't caught up yet—we see the utility of it," Gardner says.

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