

Telehealth Holds Promise for the Future of Healthcare

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By Melissa Martin, RHIA, CCS, CHTS-IM

In *Back to the Future Part II*, Marty McFly traveled from 1985 to 2015, and while there he used videoconferencing to communicate with his coworker Needles. Although the real 2015 might not be exactly the world that Marty McFly found in the movie, teleconferencing with a doctor and other telehealth technology does hold promise for the future of healthcare.

The term “telehealth” is sometimes used to encompass a broader definition of remote healthcare that may not always involve clinical services, according to the American Telemedicine Association. It certainly includes videoconferencing and a host of other emerging technologies used to improve lives in the remote delivery of healthcare.

I live in West Virginia, a rural state where telemedicine has been changing the lives of patients for several years. There is still so much more that we can do with telehealth to improve our population health here in West Virginia, as well as across the country. Today, caregivers are using videoconferencing services like Skype and FaceTime to communicate with patients to adjust their medications on a daily basis.

Michael J. Fox, well known as the actor who brought Marty McFly to life, has been very public about his journey as a patient with Parkinson’s disease. I also have a personal story regarding Parkinson’s disease that drives my interest in the possibilities of telehealth and its connection to the future of health information management (HIM). My grandmother has been gone for many years now, but I remember 1983 quite well as the year that I finally understood she had Parkinson’s disease. At one point in her journey she was hospitalized because she had gotten her medications mixed up and was not taking them as prescribed. The specialist who provided the care she needed was more than an hour away and she had an extended stay in the hospital to get her medications adjusted. Once she was able to come home our family moved to her home in a different town so my mother could make sure that my grandmother had help with her medications and other effects from the disease.

I wonder how different things could have been if telehealth was possible at that time. The technology still had a way to go back in 1983 to make telehealth what it is now, but today a patient with a complicated medication regimen can absolutely benefit from care delivered via telehealth. I also recently read an article about a young girl who created a telehealth communicator that dispenses meds for seniors—amazing!

So where does telehealth fit into our HIM future? I recently had the opportunity to participate in a telehealth retreat with over 80 healthcare providers and professionals. The other attendees at my table during this retreat included eight physicians and one administrator. We established our telehealth goals and assessed both our strengths and our barriers to success. Two of the most common barriers identified were payment and interoperability.

The number two goal in the 2015-2020 Federal Health IT Strategic Plan is transforming healthcare delivery and community health—more specifically, incorporating telehealth and mobile health within federal programs paying for healthcare. I would suggest that even in the most advanced telehealth programs across the country, payment and interoperability are among their top challenges. Both payment processes and interoperability are within the HIM wheelhouse, so let’s make sure that we all help launch our future with telehealth.

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