Measuring the Quality and Value of Telehealth

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As healthcare organizations look to refresh their strategic plans and priorities, leaders are taking a closer look at how to embed virtual care as a key component of their care delivery model.

In Huron's research of the healthcare market, adopting telehealth and digital care delivery rank as the top digital challenge for organizations; 55% of leaders reveal integrating and increasing telehealth capacity as their most important change or initiative.

To embrace telehealth as a long-term growth strategy, organizations need both an enterprisewide approach and comprehensive metrics to measure care quality and monitor program performance.

Consumer-Driven Change and Quality

With more consumers choosing a digital-first path to care and wanting to take a more proactive approach to their health, healthcare organizations cannot afford to overlook quality measures. Patient experience, visit outcomes and telehealth availability can sway which healthcare system and provider consumers choose.

Huron research into the consumer healthcare market finds significant growth in a digitally-inclined consumer segment, and that 35% of consumers name the availability of virtual care as reason to try a new provider. Overall, more than half of consumers indicate a willingness to switch providers if presented with the right driver, including greater trust and convenience, despite being satisfied with their current provider.

This is particularly notable as retail clinics and a growing number of other disruptors entice consumers with lower price tags and convenient tools and services. To stay ahead of competition, traditional health systems need to ensure they are providing top quality care beyond the walls of their facilities.

Varying Metrics to Measure the Value of Telehealth

Aside from consumer preference and loyalty, leaders also need to be preparing for regulatory requirements. Organizations like the National Academy of Medicine and The Joint Commission will continue to increase their attention on the quality of telehealth. Establishing metrics and developing a process to capture data now will not only ensure leaders are prepared for evolving regulations but can help identify opportunities for growth and improvement of their virtual services. As value-based models gain traction, virtual care capabilities and its corresponding metrics will likely be integral to how providers monitor patients.

Leaders should consider what key performance indicators (KPIs) they will use – from both a patient and provider perspective – to assess the quality and effectiveness of virtual care delivery.

Quality measures for in-person visits can provide a starting point, but additional KPIs are needed to measure the unique components of virtual care. Telehealth frameworks developed by the National Quality Forum and American Academy of Pediatrics' SPROUT (Supporting Pediatric Research on Outcomes and Utilization of Telehealth) program offer measurement priority areas to consider when establishing metrics for telehealth programs, such as visit effectiveness, health outcomes, patient/provider experience, access to care and program characteristics.

Diversifying Metrics

Technical quality and patient safety are other areas leaders should be thinking about. Monitoring patient safety, privacy and access will be even more important in a virtual setting where health systems and providers have less control over the environment where care is being delivered.

As leaders establish KPIs, it's imperative to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. While some metrics are relevant across the care continuum, others should be customized to each specialty to ensure quality care is being provided and positive patient outcomes are being achieved across all telehealth programs.

This data can help leaders gauge program effectiveness by service line, for example, as well as determine whether tools and resources would be better deployed elsewhere if quality levels aren't being reached.

Another added benefit to measuring telehealth quality: Organizations can leverage data in consumer outreach programs to engage patients and their families and further differentiate their telehealth programs from competition.

Establishing Trust in Digital Healthcare

Digital tools that provide deeper personalization and convenience along with the ability to create a trustworthy experience will be essential to delivering the seamless experiences consumers now expect in healthcare.

As consumers become more wary of how their data is being used and protected, they will need assurance that digital health tools and their health data are secure. Organizations must be transparent about how they're using patient data and focus on building better data structures and shoring up their defenses against cyberattacks to gain – and keep – consumer trust.

Determining the ROI of Telehealth Programs with Quality Metrics

While quality measures are crucial to improving health outcomes and attracting and retaining patients, program performance and utilization metrics are important to gauge who telehealth programs are reaching and how they're performing.

Setting volume goals and measuring utilization can make it easier to determine adequate staffing levels and decipher whether a program is realizing a return on investment (ROI). When measuring ROI in this case, leaders should look beyond financial measures and consider who they're reaching through the telehealth program.

Truly transformational telehealth solutions that drive breakthrough value for the organization will be programs that reach across the care continuum including ambulatory, acute care and post-acute settings. As organizations strive to strike the right balance between virtual and in-person care, data-driven models and predictive analytics should be guiding decisions on where and when to expand virtual services. Equally as important is an organization's understanding of the needs, preferences and priorities of the consumers in their market.

Developing a Strategy and Holistic View

There are basic questions that leaders should be able to answer as they build out measurement strategies and KPIs for telehealth and virtual services programs. What are the benchmarks or goals for virtual services? What platform and methods will be used to capture data and analytics? Does the organization have the platform, dashboards or data visualization tools necessary to make decisions? When (at what frequency) will analytics be reviewed?

However, the broader goal should be aligning telehealth KPIs to overall organizational goals and digital transformation strategies. While developing a specific strategy and KPIs that address the unique aspects of virtual care are key to measuring telehealth quality, when it comes to data, leaders need a holistic view to glean meaningful business insights and ensure quality care is being delivered in all settings across the care continuum.

Taking an enterprise approach to analytics and data management will set up organizations for the future and enable leaders to create a robust care delivery model that not only balances virtual and in-person care, but meets consumer preferences and needs, empowers clinicians, and addresses health disparities.

As digital assets that support care delivery mature, more focus is needed on the intersection of an organization's website, electronic health record (EHR), portal and customer relationship management (CRM) strategies to support a positive, consistent consumer digital experience.

Key Takeaways

Organizations leveraging telehealth capabilities should:

Think differently.

View telehealth metrics as an opportunity to gather more information about patients and operations to make better-informed decisions and improve patient/provider experiences and outcomes.

Plan differently.

Prepare to look at each telehealth program individually to determine what specific key performance indicators (KPIs) are needed to ensure the best quality of care is being delivered across the care continuum.

Act differently.

Develop a telehealth measurement strategy that enables regular data analysis as an individual component and a collective piece of the organization's care delivery model.

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