

Virtual Care: A Vital Component of Care Delivery

BREAK DOWN BARRIERS TO CARE WITH VIRTUAL SERVICES

By Erin Bartley and Dr. Harold Picken

Virtual care — which refers to all of the ways a provider can engage with patients without being in the same room — is transforming the healthcare industry. In a recent survey from [Vidyo](#), 46% of leaders at large health systems name telehealth as their top information technology (IT) priority, with 86% of respondents anticipating adoption

Healthcare leaders cannot afford to view virtual care as a luxury.

As healthcare organizations continue their transition to value-based care, leaders cannot afford to view virtual care as a luxury — it is enabling consumers to receive care in ways that align more closely with their lives while also breaking down barriers to entry, permitting new entrants into the healthcare market and eliminating geographic boundaries among providers. To best serve consumers and remain competitive, healthcare leaders must treat virtual care as a vital component of their care delivery model.

Virtual Care and Value

Virtual care integrates multiple types of technology with care delivery, enabling healthcare organizations to better meet consumer needs. This creates many benefits, including:

- **Convenience:** Virtual services allow individuals to receive medical consultation, exercises and recommendations from providers without ever having to set foot in an office or hospital. Consumers can address health issues with virtual visits without needing to take time off from work, secure transportation or find childcare. For example, [CirusMD](#) is an app that connects a health system's physicians with participating patients. Patients can ask questions, get prescription refills, share photos or videos of their symptoms and book time for a follow-up conversation.
- **Access:** A "healthcare desert" is a geographic area with limited to no healthcare access. Because of a lack of mass transportation, lower-paying jobs, poor housing conditions and other gaps in [social determinants of health](#), rural areas tend to have fewer accessible providers than urban areas. Telehealth and other virtual services can remove location as a barrier to quality care. Even for those who do not live in a healthcare desert, patients may not always have access to specialists. Teleconsultation connects patients to specialists

outside their geographic area. For example, [Teladoc](#) is a telemedicine service that enables its users, via telephone, internet or app, to speak with licensed physicians around the world regarding non-emergency conditions, day or night.

- **Cost:** Virtual services require fewer steps and people than traditional healthcare to address consumer needs, reducing overall costs. For consumers, this chips away at price being a barrier to quality care. Consider Rite Aid's [partnership](#) with telehealth company [InTouch Health](#). Kiosks at Rite Aid's [RediClinics](#) connect store customers to clinicians who can advise on non-emergency health conditions, provide a treatment plan and schedule follow-up visits for a reduced cost. Patients still get the benefit of seeing and speaking with a physician directly while also saving the time and money needed for conventional healthcare.

A Strategic Approach to Virtual Care

As virtual care becomes a more prominent fixture in the healthcare space, leaders must determine the best path forward for incorporating virtual solutions into their service offerings. When building their organization's virtual care strategy, healthcare leaders should start here:

- **Set realistic goals that connect to the broader strategy.** As with any other transformational idea, an organization's virtual care strategy should align with its broader enterprise goals. Clarify the driving factors for your growth strategy, and define what mix of virtual capabilities are the best fit for your organizational and consumer goals.
- **Evaluate the organization's current state.** Understand reimbursement opportunities in your market, including Medicare Advantage and commercial insurers open to partnering to improve access for their patients. Ensure your technical and operational capabilities are aligned to support your virtual care strategy. Incorporating sophisticated virtual solutions may be challenging for organizations that haven't already established a [digital culture](#). Close collaboration across technical and operational leaders will be critical to the success of your virtual care journey, regardless of digital capabilities.
- **Determine whether to build or buy: technology.** While many healthcare organizations recognize the need for a technology platform, it may be harder to recognize how to get there. When determining whether to build their own branded virtual platform or collaborate with an outside vendor, organizational leaders should consider which features are non-negotiable, what the desired timeline looks like and any budgetary restraints. In doing so, they can uncover which option will be most efficient in moving the organization closer to its goals.
- **Determine whether to build or buy: services and products.** Build or buy decisions are not limited to technology platforms. New services and products are increasingly becoming available to support virtual care. Mobile medical device products and purchased services such as physicians for tele-psych or to support hospital in the home should be considered to enable and accelerate your virtual care strategy.
- **Build telehealth governance, capabilities and expertise.** While organizations will have to start with prioritized, high-value virtual capabilities, they must bring virtual care into the core executive and management capabilities and decision making. History has shown that until healthcare quality is viewed as a key aspect of organizational strategy, improvements in quality metrics and performance will languish.
- **Put healthcare patients at the center.** To improve patient satisfaction, healthcare organizations must use business models and growth strategies that are designed to make care delivery easier, faster and more consumer-friendly. Making healthcare interactions easy and convenient empowers consumers to manage their own care while minimizing the impact on their daily lives. Virtual care is also connecting healthcare organizations to consumers outside

their normal service area, exposing them to patient populations they don't know well and who may look very different from their traditional patients. Maintaining a patient-centric approach to care delivery will assist healthcare organizations in understanding and providing for all of their diverse consumers.

Consumer choice is driving investment in innovation and technology across the healthcare landscape; virtual care delivers on both. By choosing to invest in solutions identified by the voice of the consumer, leaders will create the virtual care strategy their organization needs to become a provider of choice.

Key Takeaways

To effectively leverage virtual services as a core component of their organizational strategy, healthcare leaders must:

Think differently.

Treat virtual care as an integral part of your care delivery model. Align virtual care initiatives to the organization's broader access, quality, cost and experience goals.

Plan differently.

Determine which types of services to prioritize based on consumer/market need, reimbursement vehicles and the organization's technical and operational strength to perform.

Act differently.

Leverage the best of your organization's internal capabilities, complemented by technology, service and device providers, to execute your virtual strategy quickly and achieve transformational change.



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