

The New Normal for Virtual Care: A Tool for Delivering Strategic Value

By Bret Anderson, Ryan Bertram, and Tom Kiesau, The Chartis Group

As the pandemic subsides and hospitals and health systems shape their “new normal” for care delivery, virtual care capabilities that were established over the last year can and should remain part of the next frontier in how care is delivered. However, the forcing function of the pandemic has accelerated and shifted the adoption curve of virtual care services to a degree that providers must critically evaluate their opportunities for competitive differentiation in their respective markets.

Pre-pandemic, simply offering virtual care capabilities like real-time video visits or online patient portals was considered advanced, whereas now those capabilities are table stakes. The competitive focus on virtual care in the post-pandemic world is not whether virtual care is offered but how well it meets the needs of end users and how closely it aligns with long-term strategic goals to ensure its continued relevance and sustainability.

Current Virtual Care Patterns

Virtual care adoption is stabilizing toward a new normal adoption pattern. Video visits are widely available at most provider organizations, accounting for 15–20 percent of all outpatient visits,¹ and a majority of hospitals offer online patient portals to access pertinent health information.²

Moreover, there are distinct pockets of notable transformation. Behavioral health, for example, now delivers more than two-thirds of all outpatient encounters via virtual channels. Close to a quarter of all primary care visits are virtual, while a number of medical specialties like neurology and gastroenterology are also conducting more than 20 percent of their outpatient visits through virtual modalities.³ The pandemic has offered hospitals and health systems the unprecedented opportunity to reimagine their care models and advantageously position

themselves for rapid recovery versus market competitors.

The pandemic brought forth some challenging trends for hospitals and health systems as well. Foremost among them is the downward trend over the last year in overall outpatient visits compared to pre-pandemic volumes.⁴ Given likely pressures on top-line revenue, provider organizations must deliver care more efficiently. A well-designed virtual care platform that appropriately matches patient needs with provider resources can be an important and economical lever to ensure convenient access to care.⁵

Virtual care can help manage a provider’s existing patients with a mix of clinical and non-clinical support staff, who enable follow-up care for a wide array of patient acuity levels at a lower cost than traditional, physician-centric in-person visits. Virtual care can also be a competitive differentiator for hospitals and health systems, according to a recent executive survey.⁶

Healthcare organizations can ensure their market-leading position by taking an intentional approach to designing digitally forward care models that optimize how virtual care is delivered and experienced. The virtual care infrastructure put in place during the pandemic was largely built out of short-term necessity, without a long-term adoption plan, forcing many providers to rationalize platform investments with other systems and digital access points.

Meeting the Needs of End Users

Providers now have the opportunity to refine their virtual care services to better meet the ongoing needs of end users and bring them more in line with the consumer-friendly experiences the digital age has brought forth in other major industries like retail, travel, and banking. Providers can follow the lead

Key Board Takeaways

- Perform a retrospective regarding key lessons learned from the pandemic for virtual care and develop a plan to address foundational gaps.
- Set a vision for the future care delivery paradigm that seamlessly leverages virtual care as part of the broader care experience to advance strategic imperatives.
- Define an action plan to realize that vision, clarifying how key clinical services will integrate virtual care within their delivery model to create a differentiated consumer experience across the care continuum.

of these digitally transformed peer industries by taking an “outside-in” approach to designing their digital offerings. This approach highlights consumer insights and orientation through journey maps, personas, prototyping, and direct feedback to improve the end-user experience.

Anchoring virtual care service design on meeting consumer needs also positions provider organizations well to achieve long-term sustainability and relevance by hard-wiring them to measure what matters to consumers and to perpetually drive better, more personalized, and more meaningful outcomes.

Taking an “outside-in” approach to virtual care design has several strategic benefits for hospitals and health systems. Recent polling indicates that 35 percent of the general public and half of younger adults would consider replacing their current primary care provider with one that offers virtual care.⁷ Virtual care may also boost efforts to engage a more diverse patient population, given that 52 percent of Hispanic, 43 percent of Black, and 40 percent of Asian-American patients would consider switching primary care providers to virtual care alternatives.⁸ To that end, virtual care serves as a vital tool to cultivate a trusting relationship with patients and a convenient access point across the care continuum.

1 The Chartis Group and Kythera Labs, [Telehealth Adoption Tracker](#), May 2021.

2 HIMSS/Trust Partnership, [State of Healthcare Report](#), June 2021.

3 [Telehealth Adoption Tracker](#), 2021.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Maureen Ward, Jon Freedman, and Melissa McCain, “[How to Create Digitally Forward Care Models: 5 Key Workplan Components](#),” The Chartis Group, April 2021.

6 [State of Healthcare Report](#), June 2021.

7 Hannah Mitchell, “[35% of Patients Would Consider Leaving Their Primary Care Provider for Telehealth Visits](#),” *Becker’s Hospital Review*, April 23, 2021.

8 *Ibid.*

Redefine the Future of Care Delivery

As hospitals and health systems emerge from the pandemic and look to harness the gains made in virtual care adoption for the long term, board members should ensure that the revamped processes are in place to make these digital innovations sustainable and not revert to the pre-pandemic status quo. They should first ensure that virtual care capabilities are tracking toward key metrics of high usage and strong growth trajectory across all areas of clinical care, and that they drive robust patient and provider satisfaction.

Secondly, board members should demand the development and implementation of a comprehensive plan to proactively guide and promote virtual care adoption across the clinical enterprise. Long-term and sustainable

adoption is predicated on a cohesive and economically sound approach to advancing virtual care. Without it, hospitals and health systems are at risk for devolving back to pre-pandemic care model norms, putting them at a significant competitive disadvantage. Now is the time for hospitals and health systems to seize this unprecedented opportunity to redefine their care models and avoid becoming obsolete in a market with innovative players that have recently entered the provider industry.

Ultimately, hospital and health system boards should challenge their leadership teams to build upon the nimbleness and momentum generated over the last 18 months to shepherd the next wave of digital transformation. Non-traditional industry segments (e.g., retail, consumer goods, and big tech) are placing an amplified

focus on healthcare delivery, while an unprecedented amount of private capital is flowing into healthcare today. It is therefore mission critical for incumbent hospitals and health systems to harness the power of virtual care as part of their value proposition to avoid disintermediation of their patient relationships and maintain a competitive market edge in this rapidly evolving industry.

The Governance Institute thanks Bret Anderson, Principal, Ryan Bertram, Principal, and Tom Kiesau, Director and Digital Transformation Practice Leader, The Chartis Group, for contributing this article. They can be reached at banderson@chartis.com, rbertram@chartis.com, and tkiesau@chartis.com.