Chapter 8
Online, House Call, and Other Services

ABSTRACT
This chapter focuses on new healthcare services provided online, in the patient home, and elsewhere. Under the umbrella of telehealth, there are three key modes of delivery. First, real time (synchronous) delivery requires a live telecommunication connection and uses phones, video conferencing, and chat sessions. Second, “store & forward” (asynchronous) delivery captures digital media and transmits it to providers via images, video, audio, x-rays, etc. Third, remote monitoring (synchronous or not) is a combination of real-time and store and forward and it uses connected devices. The author highlights the example of several online care companies such as Hello Health, virtuwell, Zipnosis, and American Well. House call services by nurse practitioners are on the rise again. The author focuses on the example of WhiteGlove, a service that offers access to nurse practitioner care at home or at the office seven days a week. They conclude that many patient visits to the hospital emergency rooms and to primary care physician offices are unnecessary and can be taken care of in a much cheaper and more convenient way through online interactions and house visits.

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From the halls of the White House to exam rooms around the country, most Americans now realize that their healthcare system is inexorably changing. Rules, processes, and terminology are all in flux. But what will not change, no matter what the acronym of the moment, is the core connection between doctors and the patients they care for. It is for this reason that telehealth – which now uses ubiquitous technologies to facilitate this simple connection – is moving to the fore of physician practices. Telehealth is already breaking down barriers to needed care, while enabling providers to practice in a flexible, convenient manner – generating revenue along the way. — Online Care, 2012

INTRODUCTION

The last few years have witnessed a proliferation of innovations and non-traditional ways of delivering services for minor health conditions, as well as chronic ones. Physicians have started using e-mail messages, video conferencing, online chatting sessions and text messages to communicate with patients and diagnose and treat conditions. New services allow patients to answer a series of questions online and asynchronously receive a diagnosis and prescription from a nurse practitioner. Others allow patients to receive care from the comfort of their homes. In this chapter, we discuss these innovations and assess their impact on primary care delivery in the United States.

1. ONLINE SERVICES

Many patient visits to the hospital emergency rooms and to primary care physician offices are unnecessary and can be taken care of in a much cheaper and more convenient way through online interactions and other technology-enabled visits. This section provides a brief background on telemedicine/telehealth and describes some of the online services that have emerged in the last few years.

Telemedicine and Telehealth

The American Telemedicine Association (ATA) (2013) defines telemedicine as “the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications to improve a patient’s clinical health status.” It includes multiple applications and services using two-way video, email, smart phones, wireless tools and other forms of telecommunications technology. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (2013) defines telemedicine as “the provision of clinical services to patients by practitioners from a distance via electronic communications.”

The term telemedicine is often used interchangeably with telehealth. For example, the ATA considers patient consultations via video conferencing, transmission of still images, e-health including patient portals, remote monitoring of vital signs, continuing medical education, consumer-focused wireless applications and nursing call centers to be all part of telemedicine and telehealth (ATA, 2013). Others suggest that the term telehealth refers to a broader definition of remote healthcare that does not always involve clinical services. For example, the Center for Connected Health Policy (2013) defines telehealth as “the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, public health and health administration.”

Similarly, the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) defines telehealth