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Implementing Telehealth for Independent Practices

Elation

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Dr. Owen Nishikawa
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Introduction

Since the pandemic, telehealth has become an increasingly viable method for treating patients while maintaining their safety and well-being. As a result, most independent practices have had to make the shift to providing care via telehealth, yet any of these practices had not previously been set up for virtual care.

With all these new changes, we at Elation have developed this resource to make the transition to telehealth a little less stressful for independent practices. In the first part, we'll review some telehealth best practices to ensure that you are properly scheduling, completing your patient encounter, and billing for your telehealth services.

In the second part, we'll review a range of marketing tactics to keep your existing patients informed and reassured and to bring in new patients, so you can continue to grow your independent practice

During these challenging times, we hope this guide can help you give your patients reassurance that your practice continues to offer quality remote care and give you the tools to market your practice to new patients interested in receiving your care virtually. With independent practices at the heart of healthcare, we hope we can alleviate some of the burden of these new changes so you can focus on your patients.

Telehealth and Independent Practices

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, many independent physicians began the process of rescheduling or canceling patient appointments. Much of the US was under a stay-at-home order and people were only venturing out for essential trips. While some practices closed their doors, others explored alternatives for seeing patients, including telehealth.

The Health Resources Services Administration (HSRA) defines telehealth as the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support long-distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, public health, and health administration. Technologies include videoconferencing, the internet, store-and-forward imaging, streaming media, and terrestrial and wireless communications.

In addition to the need for remote care during the pandemic, telehealth can also be useful for patients who may not be able to travel to the independent practice even during “normal” times. For example, rural patients can take advantage of telehealth without having to drive long distances for an in-office visit. Telehealth has been projected to become an integral part of the future of healthcare, well after the pandemic has passed.

With new technology comes the ability to expand your use of telehealth for your independent practice. In fact, telehealth visits can be conducted via telephone calls or video chats, making it an easy and convenient alternative to the in-office visit.

A major step in implementing telehealth for your independent practice is to inform your patients and prospective patients about the option, including how it works and how they can prepare for a successful telehealth visit. Promoting telehealth helps build awareness about how patients can easily access the healthcare services your independent practice provides.

HRSA recommends that you also share the benefits of telehealth with your patients, to reassure them that taking advantage of this option gives them the opportunity to remotely visit your practice for their routine and preventative care appointments, which they should not put off, even during COVID-19. Telehealth reduces everyone’s exposure while enabling you to continue to address your patients’ health issues.


Veronica Pike, APRN
Austin, TX

Best Practices for Telehealth

As telemedicine has become a part of the new normal, independent practices have the added responsibility of ensuring that telehealth services are properly scheduled, patient encounters are complete, and billing for telehealth services is streamlined. Despite all these changes, independent physicians are still delivering high-quality, patient-centered care. Below are a few best practices for independent physicians who depend on telehealth to provide care for their patients.

Beyond this guide, our team has also compiled a list of helpful articles as you transition through the new healthcare regulations and guidelines. In addition, we have prepared a series of videos to help you learn how to more effectively communicate with your patients, understand the latest billing and telehealth practices, and keep up to date with the latest in eOrdering.

Before the visit:

- Communicate any changes in protocol to patients and clinical staff to ensure consistency for the patient.
- Schedule appointments (via a phone or electronically).
- Send appointment reminders.

During the visit:

- **Prepare the patient.** The provider should set expectations for the patient at the beginning of the telehealth visit but reassure the patient that they will continue to receive the quality healthcare they need.
- **Engage the patient.** The patient-physician relationship depends on communication and engagement. Ask questions such as: “What are some of the things you want to talk about today? What are your primary healthcare concerns?” Then reassure the patient by responding appropriately to their concerns.

Documentation requirements for telemedicine visits are the same as a face-to-face encounter. Best practice for telemedicine visits requires that you additionally note the following in your visit note. Please check your states’ requirements for telehealth consent.

- A statement that the service was provided using telemedicine.
- A statement that informed consent was obtained from the patient.
- The location of the patient.
- The location of the provider.
- The names of all persons participating in the telemedicine service and their role in the encounter.

Additional considerations for building and maintain a positive patient-physician relationship during telehealth visits include:

- Conducting virtual visits in a quiet and secure space, to make patients feel more comfortable about the privacy of their healthcare visits.
- Understanding that some patients may not have quality or reliable internet service. These patients may require a phone call rather than a video visit.
- Taking extra time and effort to foster a strong relationship with new patients and with existing patients who are infrequent visitors to the practice.

After the visit:

Schedule any follow up appointments and communicate next steps to the patient over the phone or through a HIPPAA compliant messaging platform.

Billing for the telemedicine visit. In terms of the financial health of your practice, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and most other third-party payers have put billing codes in place for telehealth services. Clinicians can now bill for telehealth services provided for dates of service starting March 6, 2020. For more information about each type of virtual service and the billing codes refer to this guide.



Dr. Garrison Bliss
Seattle, WA

The Importance of Marketing Your Practice

Marketing your independent practice is an effective way to connect with clients and potential clients. The first thing to understand is that marketing is not sales. Your marketing strategies will be geared toward informing patients about your services, while also educating them about basic healthcare topics. The latter reinforces your expertise, helping to convince patients that you are the independent physician they need to – and want to – see for their healthcare.

You need to market to your existing patients as much as to potential patients. The 21st century patient spends a lot of time online and will want to see a useful, perhaps even interactive website, as well as posts on social media and regular, informational emails. These will become important marketing tools for your independent practice.

When you want to attract new patients, they will also be looking online for your information and for information about you. Your marketing efforts will include encouraging patients to provide referrals and reviews that can be seen by others who are searching for an independent physician.

Since the pandemic, marketing your practice will become more important as some patients might still be hesitant about seeing a physician in person and about trying the relatively new technology involved in telehealth.Although more people are getting used to meeting via video calls, they also still want that personal relationship with their healthcare provider.

Patients and prospective patients may need to be convinced that telehealth can provide the same quality services and that your team is more than capable of caring for them via telehealth. The days of hanging a shingle and knowing that people will just find you when you open a practice have faded. Today you need to market your practice and let everyone know what you have to offer.

Where to Start?

Start by deciding what your practice brand, or image, needs to be. When your patient thinks of your practice, what impression do you want them to have of you and your team?

Your brand includes everything about your practice, including your logo and colors. These need to be consistent across all of your materials, your office decorations, and all of your marketing efforts.

Determine what your brand or image should be by answering some questions:



What do you have to offer that is unique?

As a smaller practice, you are able to provide individual attention to each patient. Do you also offer house calls? Are you personally available for after-hours texts or emails?



Are you an expert in a specific area?

You may be a primary care physician, but have you had special training on a certain disease or injury?



How do you want your patients to see you?

What is the personality of your independent practice? For example, are you casual, are you family oriented, or do you cater to professionals? Your practice's personality is often a reflection of your own and your team's.

Once you know who you are and how you want to be seen, reach out to your current patients. Primarily, you'll need to reassure them about telehealth and how it can benefit everyone. In addition, you can use them as part of your marketing efforts when you ask them for referrals and positive reviews. Your potential patients are looking online to see what others say about you. Make sure your current patients are saying great things!

The next step is to be sure you have a solid, helpful website. Keywords in your site will help ensure that people searching for those keywords will find your practice. We'll discuss search engine optimization (SEO) in more detail in the section on **Your Website and SEO**.

These strategies, along with marketing emails and social media posts, may sound great but since you are a busy independent physician, you may wonder how to get it all done. You may need to hire someone who does this for a living. Another option is to tap a staff member who has the skills to keep up your website and post on social media sites for your practice.

Whatever the methods you choose for marketing your business, the key is to be consistent and to provide helpful information. You are not in a hard-sell environment. Tailor your content to be educational and to encourage patients to reach out to you for their healthcare needs, based on your unique practice personality and your expertise.



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Email Marketing Campaigns

Email communications can help you keep in touch with your current patients and reach out to new patients on a regular basis. An e-newsletter contains generic health information as well as details about your operations, to keep your independent practice top of mind when it comes time for the recipients to seek out healthcare.

Email marketing is one of the most effective and least expensive marketing strategies you can use for your independent practice. Emails are delivered directly to the recipient's inbox, so it's a more targeted message than passively posting on social media.

To build your email list, you can post a sign-up form on your website and ask patients when they come in for visits if it's okay to add them to your e-newsletter list. Do not send emails without the recipient's permission.

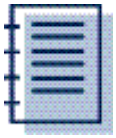
You can use a mail platform such as MailChimp or Constant Contact to manage your emails. These programs offer design assistance and a user-friendly contact list that can be grouped by interests. For example, you can segment your elderly patients into a group so you can send them information that is specific to their concerns.

There are some important points to keep in mind when developing and sending emails to market your practice and to market your telehealth services.



Stay true to your brand with graphics and colors.

Your first step in marketing your practice was to determine your brand, the image you want your patients to have of you and your practice. When you develop any kind of marketing materials, including emails, use the same color scheme, logo, and image types throughout.



Proofread.

Generating quality content is important but ensuring that the content is error-free is critical. Get several sets of eyes to review the verbiage in your emails to be sure they are written well, do not contain spelling or grammar errors, and do not contain misinformation. The point of email marketing is to impress upon the reader that you are a professional and a healthcare expert. Errors definitely send the opposite messages.



Keep a consistent schedule.

Decide, realistically, how often you can send out an e-newsletter and stick to that schedule. Once a week may be too optimistic for a busy independent practice. Every other week might be doable. At the very least, schedule it for once a month. During particularly concerning times, such as during the pandemic or during flu season in “normal” years, you probably want to send relevant information to your patients more often.



Provide helpful information, educating patients on current topics.

Your patients will appreciate factual information about the healthcare issues they are facing. Provide generic information that gives an overview of typical symptoms, for example. Share the CDC's guidance on staying safe and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Include guidance on when they should call your office or seek out emergency care.



Include information about your practice.

Provide details about the services you offer, your hours of operation, your appointment requirements, and the fact that you conduct telehealth visits. During COVID-19, in particular, you want to highlight your telehealth options. Reassure your patients that they can safely seek out care remotely and encourage them to respond with questions when they have concerns.

Include a message encouraging recipients to forward the email to others, along with a link to your sign-up form so you can continue to build your contact list.



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Your Website and SEO

In the online world of the 21st century, every business needs a website and that includes your independent practice. More and more patients are searching for information on the web. Your practice needs to be there – and it needs to show up in their search results.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is designed to do just that for you. Your patients want to know how they can safely access healthcare during the pandemic. When marketing your practice's telehealth services, you will use keywords as well as optimal website design to improve your rankings in the search results for those topics.

SEO can get very detailed and very complicated, but your independent practice you and your team should have, at the very least, a basic understanding of the concept so you can make the most use out of your website when marketing your practice. SEO included in your website will ensure your practice and your telehealth services are at the top of the results page for your patients.

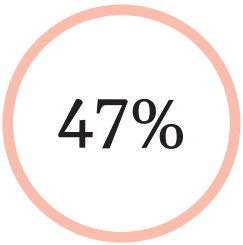
In terms of developing a website, there are a lot of platform and hosting choices for a new website. To help you out, PC Magazine has published a list of the best website builders they've tested for making it easy to create full-featured, mobile-compatible sites on a budget and with no coding required. WordPress, one of the more common platforms for websites, has also published a list of website builders to help you compare and determine which will work best for your practice.
When designing your website's look and content, consider these 2019 statistics:



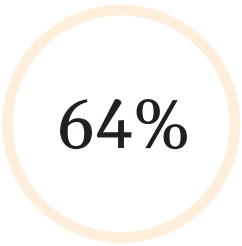
OF VISITORS WILL STOP ENGAGING WITH A WEBSITE IF THE CONTENT OR LAYOUT IS UNATTRACTIVE.



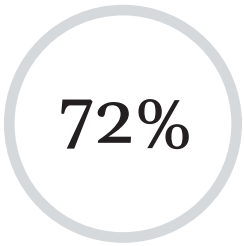
OF PEOPLE CITED THAT A WEBSITE'S DESIGN IS THE NO. 1 FACTOR IN DETERMINING THE CREDIBILITY OF A BUSINESS.



OF PEOPLE EXPECT A WEB PAGE TO LOAD IN 2 SECONDS OR LESS.



OF TOTAL VISITORS WANT TO SEE A COMPANY'S CONTACT INFORMATION ON ITS HOMEPAGE.



OF PEOPLE WANT MOBILE-FRIENDLY WEBSITES, AS 77 PERCENT OF ADULTS OWN A MOBILE PHONE.

Your website should feature your practice's location, appointment hours, and your flexibility in terms of coming to the office in-person. Include information about yourself, your background, and your qualifications, to reassure patients that you are an expert in your field. Also feature your key team members with photos and a brief background on each.

As we discussed in the section on **Email Marketing Campaigns**, your website should also feature a sign-up form for email communications. You can include a link to an email platform such as Constant Contact or MailChimp that will automatically transfer the name and email address to the contact list. This is an effective way to build your email list and to encourage patients to return to your website for updated information.

One page should be dedicated to marketing your telehealth options. Keep it simple so patients
One page should be dedicated to marketing your telehealth options. Keep it simple so patients
understand how telehealth works, that it is safe, and that it is an ideal way for them to continue to access quality healthcare. Your content should be focused on reassuring patients that telehealth is secure and that they can be "seen" via telephone call or video chat. Update the site whenever new information is available regarding telehealth options.



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Using Social Media

All of your marketing strategies should work together, to present a consistent image and the quality information your patients need from you and about you. Continue to use the same logos and color scheme in your social media posts as you have on your website, in your emails, and in your office.

You should also cross-promote each strategy. For example, on your website you will have a sign-up form encouraging visitors to subscribe to your email newsletter. In your emails and on your website, you can encourage readers to follow you or "like" you on your social media platforms. Occasional social media posts can point your followers back to your website and suggest that they sign up for your newsletter.

A well-timed social media schedule can help you coordinate these efforts, so they make sense for your independent practice and for your patients. You can include mentions of special days, such as holidays or national recognitions such as American Heart Month (appropriately enough, in February each year). There are a number of programs available for little to no cost to help you schedule social media posts, including Buffer, MeetEdgar, and Sprout Social.

As to content, you'll need to strike a delicate balance between helpful information and keeping that information generic. You will also want to write in a manner that is understandable and quickly readable. People don't tend to spend a lot of time on each post so succinct messages work best.

Keep in mind, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains, that social marketing looks at providing health services from the viewpoint of the consumer. Keep the tone casual but professional. Remember that the average person reading your posts does not understand complex healthcare-related terminology or concepts.

Social media posts are made to be shared and that will help you market your independent practice. Provide information on telehealth that will help enlighten your followers, will reassure them, and will prompt them to share it with others in their circles who could benefit as well.

There are many, many social media channels in existence today. To choose where you will spend your time and energy, consider who you are trying to reach. These are some of the most popular platforms:



Facebook

The largest social media site, Facebook began as a way for younger people to connect. Now that parents and grandparents have taken over the site, its primary audience is those over the age of 30 and, in particular, in the 40+ age groups. Post engaging content on Facebook, including short videos and eye-catching images that will grab the readers' attention.



Twitter

This site is also skewed toward the over 30 crowd, but the posts are shorter and users tend to be more active, sometimes posting multiple times a day. The character limit on Twitter is 280, so it forces you to say more with fewer words.



Instagram

If you are targeting younger adults, Instagram is a good social media platform for your practice. The content on Instagram is more visual, including images, photography, and videos. Remember to stay consistent with your brand. A nice shot of a sunset over the ocean is attractive but unless you can tie it into a healthcare message, such as encouraging your followers to get more exercise and fresh air, it will be incongruent with your attempts to market your practice.

Posting regularly on social media is important to keep your followers engaged. This is a good time to touch on the aspects of telehealth that concern your patients the most, helping them to understand how remote care works and encouraging them to contact your office for their continuing healthcare needs.



Dr. Dolly Sevier
Brownsville, TX

Conclusion

Transitioning to telehealth does not have to be intimidating. Despite the uncertainty of the pandemic, independent physicians are adapting to deliver care virtually with minimal disruption to the delivery of care and to the financial health of their practices.

As telehealth becomes a part of the new normal, we're here for independent practices each step of the way to make sure you are equipped to deal with the latest shifts in healthcare. We have developed many helpful resources designed to guide you through these challenging times – and beyond.

In addition to this ebook, our team has compiled a list of **helpful resources** as a guide for you and your practice as well, as you transition through the new healthcare regulations and guidelines. Just as independent physicians are dedicated to their practice and their patients, the team at Elation Health is deeply committed to giving you everything you need to offer personal and informed patient care.

Additional Resources

Elation's Resource Center:

Elation Health's resource center was built as a one-stop shop for finding all the most relevant information for independent physicians from HIPAA compliance to a guide on starting a direct primary care practice. We recently updated our resource center to reflect new and emerging topics relevant to the way independent physicians deliver care.

Elation Health Blogs:

Elation Health's blogs regularly publish independent practice-focused content that can help you stay on top of today's health care landscape so that you have more time for your patients. Posts are written by healthcare experts and cover a wide variety of topics including policy news, primary care research and trends, and resources for alternative practice models. Save time and energy by getting relevant and timely posts like these when you subscribe:

- Telehealth and the patient-physician relationship
- Telehealth Best Practices: How to Deliver Better Patient Care through Telehealth
- Telehealth and EHR integrations

About Elation

Elation Health is the most trusted technology platform for high-value primary care and Best in KLAS EMR-Centric Virtual Care Platform. Since 2010, the company has delivered clinical-first solutions — built on a collaborative EHR platform — that help primary care organizations start, grow, and succeed in delivering the highest-quality personalized care to patients.

Elation supports the mission of primary care by providing technology solutions that ease burden and allow physicians to focus on caring for their patients. The company serves 30,000 clinicians caring for more than 12 million Americans, including thousands of small independent practices and large prominent digital health innovators. Learn more at elationhealth.com, LinkedIn, and X.



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