

China Sees COVID-19 Telehealth Expansion



With the rapidly spreading coronavirus disease (COVID-19), hospitals have been stretched to capacity, with some providers unable to attend to patients and instead requesting them to seek care in other hospitals.

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The city of Wuhan in mainland China, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, also became known for building two hospitals in 10 days or so just to accommodate the surge in infected patients.

By contrast, although unheralded, Chinese telehealth services have also risen to the challenge, allowing many patients to access much needed care without having to travel, which helps prevent further spread of the virus. Ali Health (part of Alibaba), JD Health, and WeDoctor (backed by Tencent) are among companies offering virtual services – patient screening, triage, and treatment – in China.

Another notable example is [West China Hospital of Sichuan University's](#) collaboration with ZTE and China Telecom. This led to the deployment of indoor and outdoor 5G networks that connect doctors with patients remotely, thereby reducing providers' risk of exposure and making it possible to treat more patients in many different locations.

Telehealth offers unique capacity for remote screening, triage, and treatment, and it could be a powerful tool for reducing transmission of the disease to and among healthcare workers and patients who are not infected.

In the United States, where the incidence of COVID-19 infection is on the rise, telehealth can be an essential tool in the fight against the virus while keeping healthcare facilities safe. Already companies such as Teladoc, Buoy, and AmWell have followed China's lead and are providing similar screening and video visit services for patients across the U.S.

And with Medicare expanding coverage of telehealth, following the implementation of the "[Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act](#)," this will help generate greater interest in telemedicine in addressing the pandemic.

The new federal law, for instance, allows beneficiaries to access telehealth from home or other community locations. Previously, Medicare covers telehealth only when the patient is receiving care in a healthcare facility and/or is located in a non-urban or health professional shortage area.

Further, CMS's recently issued guidance that gives Medicare Advantage plans flexibility to waive cost-sharing and expand telehealth coverage, is also seen boosting access to telemedicine services.

For example, in Washington, among the states hardest hit by the virus outbreak, UW Medicine is directing patients with coronavirus symptoms to use its virtual clinic as a first point of access. NYU Langone, Intermountain, OHSU, and other institutions have taken the same approach.

Video visits, as well as secure messaging, can be effective tools for [remotely monitoring and treating patients](#) with mild symptoms who are staying home. Telehealth lets providers remotely monitor a patient's temperature and symptoms, from which they determine if the patient can safely stay home or should seek in-person care.

To encourage patient uptake of telehealth options, provider organisations should proactively and frequently provide information through patient-facing websites, social media, and direct outreach about how to use the technology to access care.

Source: [Health Affairs](#)

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