

New frontier



In this file photo, Joyce Thornton, telehealth coordinator at the VA, demonstrates the telehealth options for veterans at the clinic in Uniontown. Although the VA has been utilizing technology for years, those initiatives have become even more important amid the COVID-19 epidemic.

AMY FAUTH | Herald-Standard

Pandemic ushers in hospital's use of telemedicine

BY AMY FAUTH
afauth@heraldstandard.com

Telemedicine – or telehealth – was widely considered to be medicine's next frontier. That was before the coronavirus. Now, hospitals both large and small are embracing the idea not out of choice, but out of necessity.

Before the coronavirus, the service, which basically is the use of technology and telecommunication lines to transmit medical information, was being embraced by several health system, including the Veterans Assistance Health System, which has offered telehealth options for several years.

Patients at VA hospitals and clinics, including the Fayette VA Health Clinic in Uniontown, have been able to access high quality care when and where they need it not only from the clinic or in the hospital, but even from home, according to the VA's website.

At a town hall held last month as the virus was spreading across the country, Donald Koenig, director of the Pittsburgh VA Healthcare System, encouraged veterans to utilize the system so they could connect with their healthcare providers remotely in order to protect themselves, their families and VA staff.

So, what exactly is telemedicine?

In 2017, Excelsa Health published "Telemedicine: The Next Medical Frontier," an article about telemedicine, which was initially used as a way for doctors and medical institutions to share



Steve Handy

information. As technology improved and became more accessible, the article alluded that new avenues of diagnosis, monitoring and treatment would open up.

And that certainly has become a reality.

Monongahela Valley Hospital was one of the local hospitals using telehealth before the virus, according to Andrew Bilinsky, a spokesperson for the hospital.

"Monongahela Valley Hospital has used, and continues to use telehealth with our award-winning stroke care program," he said. "We have just recently rolled out a telehealth program with our Primary Care practices and will have telehealth service soon with our speciality practices."

Likewise, Uniontown Hospital had engaged technology to enhance services.

"At various times, we have utilized telehealth services to complement our service lines where applicable and utilized such capabilities to work in conjunction with other



Josh Krysak

healthcare partners; however, we had not established significant telehealth services from a broad perspective prior to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Josh Krysak, spokesperson for Uniontown Hospital.

As with other health care systems, coronavirus has been a game-changer.

"This will forever change the delivery of office care," Uniontown Hospital CEO Steve Handy said. "This will create a permanent telemedicine office visit solution that will transform primary care."

"We are utilizing telehealth specifically at our primary care offices to increase the safety of our patients," added Krysak. "We have temporarily combined the Primary Care office in Connellsville and the Primary Care office in Uniontown to the Uniontown location at 201 Mary Higginson Drive, Uniontown, PA 15401, until further notice. This will allow us to conserve staff, supplies and resources. Part of this move is to conduct as many

primary care visits via telehealth as possible."

According to Krysak, the telehealth solutions, which are conducted through a variety of methods, are beneficial because patients are able to get the care they need from home.

"This reduces their risk of exposure and their exposure risk to others around them, he added.

Recently, the hospital has implemented telephone visits as an alternative to a traditional in-person visit. During this type of visit, providers manage patient care via telephone call, which reduces the number of those who seek face-to-face care. According to Krysak, providers are reviewing and evaluations all patients on their schedules and utilizing these types of visits when appropriate.

The addition of expanded telehealth services was a decision that had to be made quickly out of necessity to help stop the spread of coronavirus at many health systems. Some of the innovative concepts may remain after the pandemic has ended and the need for such strong measures decreases.

Krysak said that's a decision for another time.

"Telehealth services will continue to be part of our plans after the pandemic has ceased, but to what extent remains to be determined," he said. "At this time we are fully focused on the safety and health of our staff and on our preparations and protocols necessary to provide for the care of our community."

As the pandemic has worsened, hospitals all around the country had to first

restrict families from visiting loved ones in the hospital and then ultimately suspend visitation of patients in the hospitals. Utilizing technology, such as video visits, is an option some hospitals have explored.

Although Mon Valley Hospital doesn't have a televisit program in place, it is considering one for the future.

"In the meantime, we encourage our patients to bring their own mobile devices to our facility and use them to communicate with friends and family using readily available applications like FaceTime or Google Duo," said Bilinsky.

He added that community members should set up these types of tele-video applications on their personal devices today now that the stay-at-home order has been expanded to the whole state and in preparation of self-quarantine, or a hospital admission.

At Uniontown Hospital, Krysak said the hospital has come up with a plan to keep patients connected with their loved ones using technology.

"When we made the difficult decision to suspend visits for the safety of our patients and staff, we immediately worked to provide additional ways for our patients to connect with loved ones in addition to telephone calls," said Krysak. "We have iPads and tablets available to them to be able to connect through apps like Facetime and Skype so they can not only hear, but also see their family. We recognize the significant role that family support plays in the healing process and will do all we can to try and accommodate such televisits."

"This will forever change the delivery of office care. This will create a permanent telemedicine office visit solution that will transform primary care."

— Steve Handy, CEO of Uniontown Hospital