

A photograph showing a doctor on a laptop screen in a hospital room, interacting with a patient in a bed. The doctor is smiling and wearing a stethoscope. The patient is wearing a white hospital gown and has their hand near their face. The word "TELEHEALTH" is overlaid in large white letters across the center of the image.

TELEHEALTH

Implementation and Optimization Guidelines

Due to the number of moving parts required to properly stand up a successful telehealth platform, it can be difficult for any healthcare organization to manage. While getting 'something working' is often the near term goal, moving to a strategic outlook on capabilities and focusing on optimization will pave the way for healthy patient experiences. As a healthcare professional tasked with navigating this next level of growth, keep the factors below in mind while planning the next steps of your journey.

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PART 1: THE TECH



INTEGRATE YOUR TOOLS

The technology available in health care has progressed in several areas over the last five years, however it was not until the pandemic that we began to see an accelerated focus on video technology specifically. This shift in focus is driving conversations at every level of health care, from [new legislation on reimbursements](#) to local hospitals developing creative processes to balance virtual visits. As the frequency of use increases, one very noticeable difference is the ease at which video systems scale or do not scale. In many cases this can be attributed to a product's ability to integrate with an EMR (electronic medical record) and the adjacent systems. When implemented properly, telehealth should deliver new efficiencies and simpler experiences by all. This can only be accomplished if the tools have the right level of integration to make the video portion of a visit seamless to both parties.



PROMOTE BUY-IN

When reviewing current solutions or evaluating new ones, ensure buy-in from all the possible areas of the business and document the requirements in detail. Leverage solution architects to design a future state with end-to-end connectivity that encompasses the full revenue cycle as well as the patient's interaction with the EMR. Be aware of the various types of integrations with EMR's available today and evaluate which ones are critical to meeting your organization's objectives. Keep in mind where the video will be embedded, how patients will access it, and what kind of devices will be used. Evaluate the product's capabilities as well as the vendors themselves. Lean towards vendors that simplify the integration, are knowledgeable about the implementation and not just the product, and are willing to do much of the heavy lifting.



LOOK TO THE VENDOR

Mature healthcare organizations will develop an ecosystem where the patient portal gives the patient the ability to create, join, and manage their appointments in one location. These organizations enable patients to quickly view lab results, past records and charts, enable analytics, and simplify the claims management process. Look to vendors to provide the integration that enables these to take place. Expect expertise of these software developers to integrate with an existing modern EMR, help with billing and revenue cycle optimization, insurance verification, and simplifying patient-doctor communications. If billing and revenue cycles are not handled by your current implementation of an EMR and telehealth solution, you need to rethink the future of your telehealth offering.



PATIENT EXPECTATIONS

Patients today expect a certain level of access to their providers. This expectation can be met through well-developed patient portals and apps that enable offline communication, support online payments, and provide the patient with their own records to review. Integrate patient facing apps that enable them to be a “one stop shop” to perform a variety of tasks such as refill prescriptions or schedule a follow up visit. This integration should enable the automation of how appointments are managed and simplify how doctors interact with patients and their records virtually. With EMR’s today touching every facet of the health care for in-person visits, ensure those same efficiencies are offered for users of the telehealth system.

PROVIDE SCALABILITY AND SIMPLE MANAGEMENT



KEEP IT SIMPLE

With a large variety of tools available today for video conferencing, keep the operations teams in mind. “What will it require to keep this up and running?” is an important question to ask teams when evaluating a vendor’s product. The goal is to keep the management as simple as possible and to adopt something that does not require an immediate increase in staff to support it. As the telehealth services being offered expand and patient base grows this may change, however an increase in staff needs to be driven by demand rather than hope. This assessment should include both clinical and technical staff. Look at the infrastructure resources required to keep the tool online and the costs associated. The clinical teams who will use these tools and support the end users need a voice in these discussions and time to evaluate the impact each solution will have on their resources. Arm these teams with initial criteria and requirements to consider, such as team scalability for product growth.



RECONSIDER CUSTOM

Healthcare organizations might be inclined to consider building a custom solution, or at least highly customizing one. The fact is, it’s best to focus on off-the-shelf with less customization to increase success of the initial deployment and provide scalability for the future. With customization comes increased overhead on future upgrades which can place strain on the teams tasked with supporting these tools. These out of the box solutions give the business more flexibility by not catering to very specific use cases which can change over time with market trends.

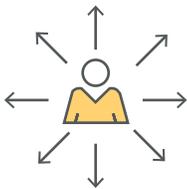


IDENTIFY EXISTING STRATEGIES

While evaluating solutions, keep in mind any existing infrastructure strategies such as leveraging SaaS solutions or hosting on-prem. The primary consideration with the location of the product is consistency with existing tools that the video application needs to integrate with. Hosting in the cloud affords the opportunity to minimize cost by quickly scaling up and down based on user demand but can also add overhead for cloud egress charges if the primary strategy is on-prem. Ask vendors about their licensing and hosting options and give this thought with the integration and management in mind.

PART 2: THE PEOPLE

DEDICATE TEAMS TO DRIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE AND EFFICIENCY



KNOW WHEN TO OUTSOURCE

When diving into telehealth, assess to what extent your organization can take ownership of the various processes. Size, organization structure, and IT resources are just a few components that go into this equation. If there are not proper resources to allocate, it may be most efficient to outsource roles to a third-party vendor. As the reimbursement process is a priority, medical billing companies can provide the expertise of dedicated billing teams. They can make fewer errors in billing (thus shorter time for return) and free up clinicians to focus on clinical practice. Vendors are also able to consider ever-changing legislation for insurance and billing policies. By outsourcing the billing process, your organization can focus most on what it does best and leave the billing efficiencies to a vendor.”

DEDICATE SUFFICIENT BUDGET TO OBTAIN THE RIGHT SOLUTIONS AND PEOPLE



UNDERSTAND YOUR SIZE

When choosing to invest in telehealth and its infrastructure, address components such as size, budget, and available supporting staff. It is beneficial to perform a scoping and sizing exercise to determine estimated costs for the software, hardware, and people. Whether it is standing up new infrastructure or updating a current system, it could take years and a lot of money for IT staff to incorporate new platforms into the current model.



HOW MUCH TO INVEST

Although telehealth efforts can have a hefty price tag upfront, remember that it is a long-term investment. It is unrealistic to expect a rapid return on investment for most applications. Telehealth should be considered as part of the yearly budgeting process to build and maintain a competitive service. The ROI on the investment depends on how much initially invested. Enterprise grade solutions will cost more up front, but can be more effective to optimize delivery of care, reach remote locations, and increase patient satisfaction. Increasing patient volume and optimizing visit times also needs to be a factor in evaluating ROI. Ultimately, leadership should evaluate the program's impact on increasing revenue, quality of health, and patient satisfaction relative to cost.

Continue to monitor government funds available for investing in telehealth infrastructure. For example, during the response to COVID-19, the Cares Act was released that provided \$200 million in funding for building telehealth infrastructure. The goal of these efforts are to make telehealth services readily available for patients and providers all over the country. It is important to note that these policies are continuously updated and changing.

BUILD A VIRTUAL CARE SUPPORT MODEL



INCREASE EFFICIENCY WITH TIME

During the recent expansion of telehealth, it is predicted that virtual services will be utilized for less-acute care and that prescriptions will increase due to easier access to healthcare professionals. Assess and evaluate where offering virtual care makes the most sense for patients and the providers time. This is already being incorporated by many providers through virtual post operation follow ups, home patient tracking, and even mental health visits. These forms of virtual care lower strain on hospitals and allow staff to be more efficient with their time.



SUPPORT YOUR WORKFORCE AND PATIENT NETWORK

To ensure a successful roll out of telehealth technologies, identify the technical support roles required to support providers and patients with calls. Part of this equation is ensuring the model is scalable so that it can be quickly implemented to support the clear and immediate need for broader virtual care offerings. Many providers are currently seeing success by having a team of support personnel who can assist with technical issues that providers experience. They can provide support with webcams, computers, and ensure network capabilities are in place. Having dedicated teams for this support eases potential frustrations with new technology and allows doctors to deploy the technology to areas of practice where needed.

The other half of the equation is patient support and ensuring processes are in place to manage their needs. Patients are more likely to have technical challenges or questions depending on their comfort level with technology or device types and thus need to have a well-prepared service team standing by. A designated team or portion of a team should reach out to patients' days before their visits to perform technical screenings, make sure the patient can launch the visit, and answer non-clinical questions. This can increase the efficiency of providers on the day of the visit and improve the patient's experience.

Depending on the size of your organization, the available resources to dedicate, at least part-time, to this role will vary. Larger organizations with higher volumes of online visits should investigate new organizational structures that split staff support functions to find efficiencies. Any organization with low volume may look at building out “virtual teams” where one’s role on the team changes according to a defined schedule. The indirect impact generated with this structured approach will allow employees increased focus on specific problem types. As you build out this structure, be sure to maintain flexibility for future changes in demand. Define the inflection points when “virtual teams” need to be adjusted or when additional headcount is required.



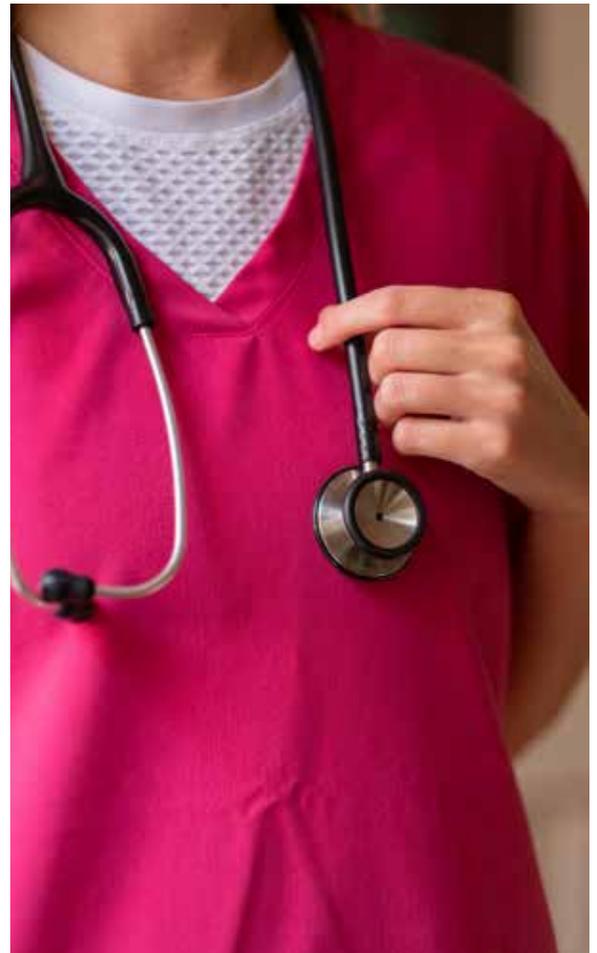
TRAIN YOUR WORKFORCE

Any change in an environment must be accounted for. When evaluating a telehealth deployment or change, ensure adequate training is provided for physicians, staff, IT, and others. Training will enable them to greet the change in a positive light and increase the likelihood of a smooth transition. A great way to ensure success is to use a diversified training approach to familiarize employees with the telehealth platform, its interface, and features. Provide a variety of avenues for staff to see, work with, and learn about video visits and their role such as classroom and [virtual training sessions](#). Be sure to account for the patient view by setting up role play scenarios in training for staff to understand how patients will experience these visits. Follow up the training with support and reference materials that can be easily accessed. By giving staff multiple ways to gain familiarity with the system and adjust their new day-to-day early on, change can become a good thing.



TELE-TRIAGE

A popular use for telehealth is utilizing self-triage platforms for patients to determine symptoms and severity of illness. By implementing a virtual visit QA process, doctors manage the level and quality of care being administered. By incorporating triage and diagnosis into a telehealth application, it helps patients identify what issues they may be dealing with and what the appropriate next steps are. Not only does online tele-triage help quickly compile a patient’s data, but it also allows staff members to shift attention to more emergent situations. Healthcare providers should ensure their QA and triage systems are tailored and adapted to best help their staff and the current situations they are facing. Many providers are taking it a step further to include after appointment questionnaires to have constant improvement and discover where patients are facing issues.





CURATE THE OFFERINGS

A big challenge to any healthcare organization is determining what services to initially offer virtually to patients and then how to expand the offerings. Financially driven considerations such as reimbursement are at play as well as feasibility factors like the overall effectiveness of a virtual visit or the organizational support. To solve for this, several things need to be evaluated.

1. Care delivery strategy:

Look for services you can easily integrate with your care delivery model. These services should round out the patient care experience and help satisfy existing patient needs. Think about quick follow up visits after a surgery that don't require labs – this lightens the burden on the patient without altering the level of care administered.

2. Organizational champions:

To mature telehealth practices, the medical leaders over those areas need to be involved. When evaluating areas to explore offering up virtually, consider the people running those practices and look for those who can be trusted to be highly involved in the success of a program's launch and maturity.

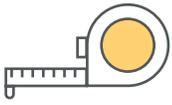
3. Market demand:

The long-term success of any practice or service is ultimately determined by its demand within the local market. Engage experts to help perform a market analysis to understand which services are in high demand for the region and look to those as possibilities for an initial investment. Meeting an existing demand is often simpler than increasing the demand and can generate faster returns. This should include evaluating what services would be most beneficial for the populations served such as elderly or rural communities.

4. Reimbursement:

One of the largest considerations for many is the ability to recoup costs on virtual visits to support the long term adoption. Because legislation and other factors around the potential for reimbursement is changing rapidly, it is important that leaders stay informed by regularly communicating with payers, leaders of health plans, and their political representatives to understand the evolving landscape.





MEASURE YOUR SUCCESS

To measure the success of virtual care, consider using Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Begin by collecting relevant data, including patient IDs, appointment attributes, appointment length, count of no-shows, and technical issues encountered. Some examples of KPIs used to measure outcome and monitor the success of virtual visits include diagnostic accuracy, referral rates, patient satisfaction levels, cost per visit, and average waiting times. Telehealth KPIs provide insight into how patients are using telehealth in comparison to in-person visits, and additionally, the metrics gathered from telehealth usage data can help set organization-wide goals and better understand the needs of the consumer, especially in terms of efficiency and ease of use. Emphasize [change management](#) and clinical transformation as markers of successful telehealth adoption and integration.



ESTABLISH ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Effectively implementing a telemedicine program involves establishing the management structure to support and execute a healthcare system's new virtual offerings. A well-managed telehealth service area has clearly defined management roles with specific and comprehensive responsibilities understood by all levels of the organization. Review the current structure of leadership, clinicians and staff, and, align telehealth services, roles, and responsibilities with this structure. Directors and program leads are excellent candidates to champion change within their organization. They can become the responsible party for implementing and managing telemedicine, setting their healthcare system's telehealth service management structure up for success and driving adoption of roles for all members of their team.

ADOPTION



EASY ADOPTION

Encouraging adoption of telemedicine services in a healthcare system can appear daunting. Clinicians and patients alike may be wary of insurance coverage gaps and their technological savviness; some individuals feel the quality of their provider-patient relationship is in jeopardy. The solutions implemented to promote telehealth adoption can help overcome these barriers. Customize online platforms to facilitate appreciation for and easier use of web-based services in patient populations. Present telemedicine implementation in a way that aligns with healthcare system values and missions to gain providers' trust of the technology and prompt cultural acceptance. Highlight the convenience and safety that come with telehealth services for both providers and patients. Implementing telemedicine is a valuable investment in a healthcare system; clinicians and patients who are in support of telehealth adoption will make for a more effective implementation and prove to be a successful addition to medical services.

EXTERNAL REACH AND MARKETING



MARKET YOUR SERVICES

- Reach specific patient populations with geotargeting, adapting advertisement to the audience in question. 84% of individuals aged 65 or older indicated they would like to utilize telehealth services for prescription renewals, so marketing a healthcare system's ease of virtual prescription renewal will likely increase telemedicine use in this demographic. Understand the needs of your patient populations and market the appropriate telehealth services. Millennials aged 18-34 are the most interested out of all age groups in using telemedicine for mental health visits, so emphasize virtual behavioral health services in advertisements to this generation of patients.
- Utilize an existing patient base to market telehealth services. Email campaigns and flyers around clinics and waiting areas are critical tools for exhibiting a healthcare system's telemedicine offerings to existing patient networks. Let high quality virtual services speak for themselves as patients utilize them and review their experience; word of mouth presents a gateway of opportunity for telehealth services.



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

- Ensure a strong and centralized marketing effort for your telehealth services. The goal is to drive demand for the new telehealth offerings. Make sure that your patients are aware and informed about your new offerings. Send emails to patients and employees to announce a telemedicine launch, provide materials in your clinic like pamphlets or instructional hand-outs, and utilize social media to highlight the new features. Making patients aware of telehealth services is a vital part to safeguard a ROI on the original investment.
- Consider how your marketing content is consumed by various target audiences. If your goal is to gain new and younger patients, focus on social media. Emphasize the quick, efficient, and affordable advantages to telehealth. If the goal is to increase participation among current patients, try working with your doctors to advertise during in-office visits and invest in patient awareness programs. If a patient is in for a check-up or a post-op appointment, inform them how next time it can be virtual to save time and efforts.
- Pay attention to the information and message you are creating within your marketing content. Emphasize takeaway messages that show care and safety for the patients and providers. Patients often have apprehension about PCI (credit card data) security and upholding a standard of care that they are used to. This is the message you want to advertise to put worries at ease. Additionally, understand your brand and adapt to the current market competitors. Maintain your brand that patients are used to but also look to competitors to stay current and push innovation.

PART 3: THE CHALLENGES

LEGISLATION AND REIMBURSEMENT



HEALTHCARE AND GOVERNMENT

Today, one of the largest changes seen across the nation's healthcare providers is the prioritization of offering telehealth services. Payers have followed suit, with many of the nation's largest health insurance providers recommending patients move to virtual care by waiving copays for using virtual services. Similarly, another sign of the times is the changes to legislation surrounding Medicare and Medicaid that have come to fruition since March of 2020. The need for flexibility amid the COVID-19 pandemic became increasingly clear, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services consequently expanded access to telehealth visits by waiving fees. [Nearly nine million people on the Medicare plan used telemedicine for services during the height of the virus in early 2020.](#) While it is uncertain if these temporary measures will come to be more permanent, conversations around the future of digital healthcare will continue amongst policymakers.

In terms of cost and quality, there is still a lot to be learned about telemedicine. One of the biggest hurdles to the adoption of telehealth policies by both the government and insurers are the costs involved. Congress would have to pass specific legislation to make some of these Medicare changes permanent, and there is interest in doing so among those in Congress. Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon introduced legislation in August of 2020, saying, "The COVID-19 pandemic has been a trial by fire, but the experience to date has made clear that the health care system is ready for broader access to telehealth on a permanent basis." While the debate of how to address Telemedicine long-term continues, it is becoming clear that an increase in accessibility to physicians is the way of the future.

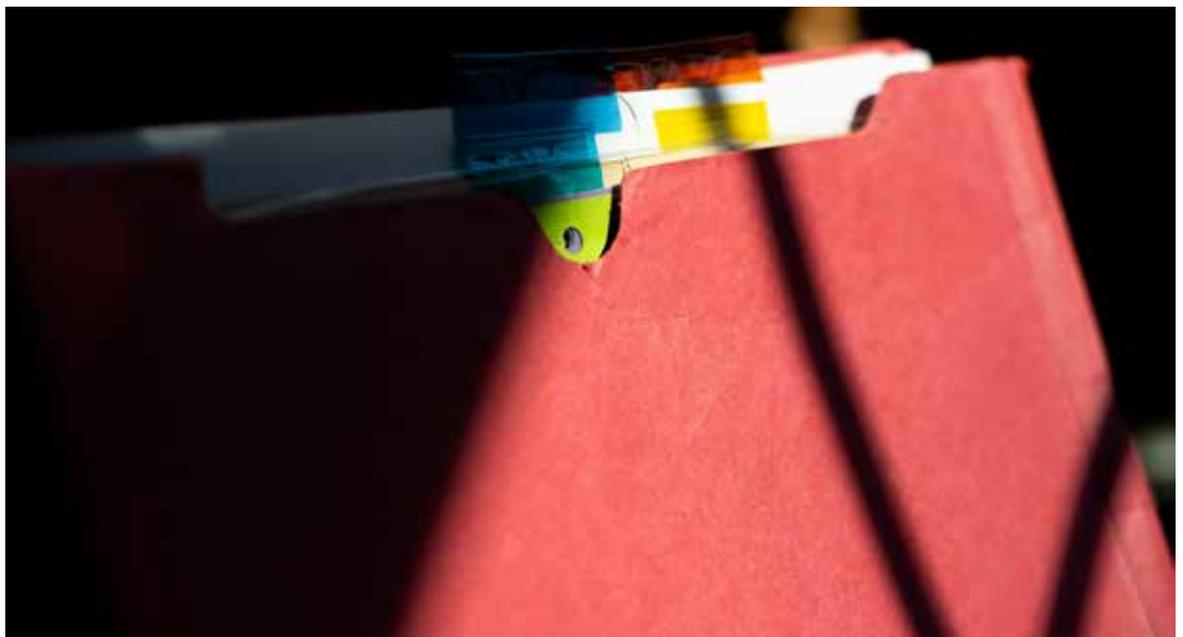
RURAL AREAS AND LIMITED ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY



EQUAL ACCESS TO TELEHEALTH

Additional challenges exist for healthcare systems trying to utilize telemedicine for patients in rural or low-income areas. While some healthcare systems serving low-income areas have implemented telehealth services, the populations they serve often lack access to high-speed internet or the technology to successfully complete a video visit. For healthcare providers serving rural or low-income communities to successfully utilize telemedicine, proper reimbursement from government and private insurers needs to be available, as well as holistic telehealth training and implementation.

Patients living in rural areas often do not have the quality of internet to effectively access services that demand large amounts of bandwidth. Hospitals and clinics can do their part to aid these populations by staying educated on and aware of government subsidies and programs that offer opportunities for these communities to access telehealth services. Additionally, it is critical that providers and healthcare systems ensure their patients have the correct tools when promoting telehealth services. Financial barriers on the provider side are centered around a lack of reimbursement and non-inclusive definitions of telehealth services. For example, phone consultations may not qualify for reimbursement. However, there are opportunities for healthcare providers to bridge the gap. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is funding a \$100 million Connected Care pilot program that will fund providers to deliver virtual/remote care to underserved populations, including rural and veteran patients. This funding will also assess how the Universal Service Fund can support telehealth services in the long-term. Funding will go towards implementing connected care services, equipment and resources, connection populations to broadband services, and ensuring households with internet have adequate equipment to utilize virtual services. Initiatives like the FCC's draw attention to the importance of expanding telehealth as a solution beyond the pandemic. Any health system that interacts with a digitally limited community needs to consider their reach when it comes to telehealth services.





DOES AGE MATTER?

Telemedicine adoption is different across generations due to comfort with technology. Older adults are trying to embrace technology; however, they often report frustration with new technology that inhibits their ability to use it, leaving them unmotivated. During the recent lockdowns, elder generations' hesitation to use technology is reflected in the numbers. The share of people who used an internet-connected device to talk by video with family and friends drops from 71% of people ages 30-49 to 57% of people ages 50-64 and 38% of people ages 65 and older. Providers should recognize this generational challenge and take steps to pander to this group. Older demographics have potential to benefit the most from virtual care. In cases where senior citizens are not able to leave their home or travel for care, it can help with remote patient monitoring and chronic disease management. Additionally, in the case of today's pandemic, it provides a safe platform to receive care without being exposed to illnesses. Providers can attempt to mitigate the technology hesitation by providing both visual and audio guidance, user-friendly images on instructions, and ensuring the patient understands the telehealth application is available. Some doctors have reported success through having the first meeting in person to gain trust and comfort and then moving to a virtual setting moving forward.

As Millennials and Generation Z become part of the workforce, their preferences for tech-savvy options are seen in telehealth. They are looking for healthcare that includes speed and convenience provided by a technical component. Less and less Millennials have a primary care physician and opt for specialists or alternative solutions to their medical problems. [If given the option, 74% of Millennials said they would rather see a doctor through a virtual visit.](#) For providers, telemedicine can open a whole new target audience that may not have used their resources without a telehealth option.

Consider the variation of ages that will be using the telehealth services and ensure it is age friendly. Patients want to feel their interactions are personal so it can be difficult [to create a friendly, tailored environment](#), while also being multigenerational. To begin, align the care with specific health outcome goals for each patient by asking about preferences and priorities. With self-triage and beginning questions, telehealth calls can easily seem robotic, therefore take the time to ask personal questions and know the patient needs. Create an easy to manage platform to prescribe medication and ensure patients understand what they are prescribed. Specific to older patients, make sure to address their mobility and mentation. It is vital to check the patient's cognitive ability to provide and take in information. Additionally, by learning about lifestyle and activity of the patient, it can aid any lost information due to not seeing them in person.