

The Pandemic is Delivering the Future of Rural Health Care

From video consults to home-based self-management, from a country doctor's best guesses to the Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence

By Anthony F. Hall

To curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, New York State began limiting face-to-face interactions in mid-March.

In response, local health centers and hospitals accelerated the use of virtual or remote health care, otherwise known as telehealth, which now has the potential to revolutionize the delivery of health care in rural, sparsely populated regions such as the Adirondacks.

"The accelerated use of telehealth was an unexpected silver lining in our 'new normal,'" said Elizabeth Rogers, the director of communications for the University of Vermont Health Network – Elizabethtown Community Hospital, which operates the hospital in Ticonderoga.

Across the Burlington-based network, telehealth visits leapt from 60 per week to 6,000 per week, said Rogers.

According to Dr. Kevin Gallagher of the Hudson Headwaters Health Network, that organization's providers have held nearly 8,000 telephone consultations and have seen more than 14,000 patients via video since March 23.

Even as the health centers reopen for patients' visits, as many as 15 to 25% of the network's appointments could continue to be managed remotely, said Gallagher.

"The benefit to our patients cannot be over-stated," said Kevin Dougre, the Network's Chief of Medical Staff operations. "Hudson Headwaters serves patients in some of the most rural areas in the state. There are several barriers to the delivery of care, including significant distances between communities and weather-related issues. Providing a telehealth option is extremely important. We believe that patients will embrace this technology and that our telehealth program will grow rapidly."

"Never let a crisis go to waste."

According to Patti Hammond, Vice President for Physician Practice Management at Glens Falls Hospital, the possibilities of telehealth have long been obvious to the hospital's 180-strong medical staff.

"We hadn't gone down that road largely because the insurance companies were still struggling with how to reimburse providers for that kind of service," said Hammond. "But at the start of the pandemic, the insurance companies stepped up and agreed to reimburse us as if that patient had actually come to the office."

Regulations that impeded remote treatment were also relaxed, said Dr. Gallagher.

Insurance companies even agreed to reimburse providers for telephone consultations when video consults were not feasible, said Hammond.

Technologies that enable providers and patients to see one another, rather than just speak to one another, however, are preferred, said Dr. Rob Demuro, Medical Director for Primary Care at Elizabethtown Community Hospital.

"With video visits, we are able to see our patients, make eye contact, read expressions. Sometimes an illness like depression manifests itself more in the style in which people communicate, not just in the words they use," said Demuro.

Remaining Barriers to Telehealth

According to Demuro, "The biggest barrier to telehealth has been WiFi connectivity. I don't think I appreciated how challenging that is for some people. Some patients have to be in a particular spot, such as their lawn, to be able to connect for a video visit. It is clear that reliable and affordable internet access is integral to our future when it comes to telehealth."



LtoR: Dr. Tucker Slingerland & Dr. John Brumstead, leaders of Hudson Headwaters Health Network and the UVM Health Network, respectively, at the opening of Ticonderoga's new hospital in 2018. Dr. Kevin Gallagher, HHHN. Patti Hammond, Glens Falls Hospital. Dr. John E. Kelly III. The IBM executive vice president and Lake George resident is a leader in developing AI and data-driven health care technologies.

Federal funding, grants from foundations and even donations-in-kind from cable and wireless service vendors enabled hospitals and health centers to expand the use of telehealth during the first few months of the pandemic.

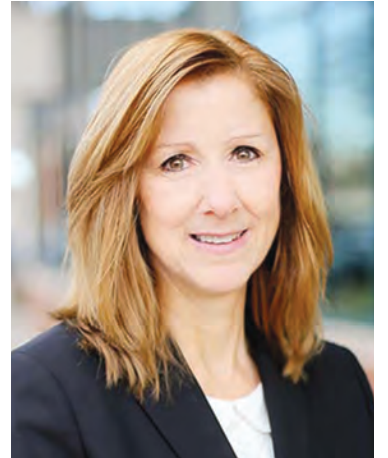
The hospitals and health centers now have the clinical equipment they need for video consultations, and, in some cases, for remote diagnosis and monitoring.

Nevertheless, limited WiFi connectivity and access to broadband technologies remain an obstacle to the permanent expansion of telehealth, several providers said.

"The lack of service in remote areas has been an issue," said Glens

Falls Hospital's Hammond. "Anyone who doesn't have access to internet services and equipment can't participate in what has quickly

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Freedom Boat Club Adds Electric Powered Boat to Fleet

By Mirror Staff

Freedom Boat Club has added an electric powered boat to its fleet of member-operated vessels, owners Matt & Rebecca O'Hara have announced.

"We sought member input over the past couple of years about whether there is an appetite for this type of boat and the feedback we

got was that there as a high demand for electric boating. People love the idea of being able to boat in an environmentally friendly way and are looking forward to testing out the Volt," said O'Hara.

The Canadian Electric Boat Volt will be powered by a Torqeedo Cruise 4.0 motor and two Lithium-Ion batteries giving it a range of up to ten hours on the water.

The Freedom Boat Club is also a dealer of Torqeedo electric motors.

"Having a boat powered by an electric motor in the fleet is a great way to bring more attention to the benefits of electric boating," said O'Hara.

The O'Haras launched the Freedom Boat Club in 2016.

Commonly described as a nautical time share, Matt O'Hara

prefers the term, "a country club on water."

"Rather than reserving a tee time, you reserve boating time," said O'Hara. "All our members have to do is make a reservation, show up at the dock, and get out on the water."

After only a few years of operation, the business outgrew its base at Beckley's Marina in

Diamond Point, which the O'Haras also leased and operated.

Freedom Boat Club is now part of Queen Boat Company, located at Dunhams Bay at the former site of the Howards' Sea Ray dealership and before that, Donald Pensel's marina.

The O'Haras are in the process of making extensive improvements to the buildings and grounds.

LG Land Conservancy's 2020 Hike-A-Thon

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together, the Conservancy stated.

Those who have already registered for this year's event will receive a 2020 commemorative t-shirt.

Those who haven't registered are asked "to show Hike-A-Thon Pride" by wearing a t-shirt from previous events, said Hoffman.

Past years' t-shirts can be purchased by visiting the Lake George Land Conservancy's website.

Those who registered for the event in early spring will receive a free 2020 t-shirt, whose design is the work of SUNY Adirondack New Media Early College Career Academy (ECCA) student, Madison Caravella, a high school senior from Saratoga Springs City School District.

The Lake George Land Conservancy teamed up with Media Arts Instructor Brandon Segal to give students a real-life experience of working with a client.

"As always, we are so grateful to all of those who made a donation with their registration, as well as to our sponsors. This year their support has been especially important," said

Hoffman.

The 2020 Hike-A-Thon sponsors include: the Lake George Mirror, the event's media sponsor; Carl Heilman, II/Wild Visions, Inc.; Bruce Mowery of North Country HeliFlite; the Town of Bolton; the Adirondack Pub and Brewery; Lake George RV Park; the Rotary Club of Lake George; Camp David, Lake George; International Paper, Ticonderoga Mill; JUST water; Love is on Lake George; Arcurio Consulting; and Cedar Graphics. The event's new website was designed by Connally Creative.

After the first Lake George Hike-A-Thon, which was organized in 2013 as a celebration of the Conservancy's 25th anniversary, the event became a Lake George tradition, enabling the Conservancy to showcase its parks and preserves and to increase appreciation of the outdoors while, at the same time, educating the public about the need to protect land if water quality is to be preserved.

For more information, visit lakegeorgehikeathon.org or contact Sarah Hoffman at 518-644-9673, or email shoffman@lgc.org. For news and updates, follow the Hike-A-Thon on Facebook at LakeGeorgeHikeAThon.

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become the primary method of connection between a patient and their doctor," said Saratoga Hospital CEO and President Angelo Calbone.

Telehealth in the Post-COVID-19 Era

Although telehealth expanded from necessity, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, "the cat's out of the bag," said Hudson Headwaters' Gallagher.

"In the post-COVID-19 era, there will be no going back. We've proven that telehealth can effectively deliver care," he said.

To maintain and further develop telehealth, broadband networks must expand until no gaps in coverage remain.

Moreover, the providers said, the reimbursement rates for remote care cannot be contingent upon emergencies. They must be based on reliable, lasting agreements.

Members of Congress, including Rep. Elise Stefanik, are now pushing the federal government's Center for Medicare and Medicaid to continue reimbursing providers at the current rates for health care delivered remotely.

And a totally wired Adirondack Park no longer seems somewhere in

the distant future, said Dr. Gallagher.

The pandemic not only revealed the potential of telehealth to care for patients remotely but also, the gaps in connectivity. Communities and families already chronically underserved by public institutions and the private sector were affected the worst, said Gallagher.

"Because the way we implemented telehealth was so widespread, we also exposed the vulnerability of those who remained out of reach. The barriers that prevent this population from being able to access care, in the same way that everybody else is able to, have to be removed. We showed that in order to flatten the curve of the virus, broadband is a necessity. It's no longer just 'nice to have,'" said Gallagher.

Gallagher said that advocacy of state legislators, county and local governments and non-profit organizations for improved broadband and internet infrastructure will ultimately be successful.

"The push for broadband is moving along. People really are coming together," he said.

The Future of Health Care Belongs to Smart Machines

Gallagher and Todd Young, Director of Telehealth for the UVM

Health Network, however, believe that the advances in telehealth made during the months of the pandemic are merely early stages in a long-term evolution in the delivery of health care.

"This is just the beginning," said Gallagher. "Data will be gathered from patients remotely. This is the brand new frontier of managing healthcare."

Todd Young said, "The feedback from our physicians is that home based medical devices that share real-time and stored data will greatly improve care and quality, especially with chronic illnesses."

"Home-generated data is a missing piece when replacing in-person care," Young continued. "Currently, at UVMHN, we do have programs in Cardiology and Pulmonology that are doing this now, but in a limited capacity."

Young concluded, "We believe the COVID pandemic will be the driver to expand the use of home devices as the investment in digital health expands."

According to Dr. John E. Kelly III, IBM's Executive Vice-President whose portfolio has included research in smart healthcare devices, the Hudson Headwaters and UVM networks "are right on track."

"The first phase of telehealth, simply connecting doctors with patients, while more convenient, really doesn't change the nature of diagnosis and treatment," said Kelly. "The second phase will be much more about collecting health data continually and analyzing the data in real time. Monitoring devices will take remote action, modifying treatments."

Kelly told us, "Once widespread broadband access is achieved, the remaining barriers to deploying smart health care devices are: investment; payer reimbursement; rapid but safe governmental approval of the most important devices; and an embrace of the new technologies by physicians."

"At IBM," said Kelly, "we firmly believe that this is the future of health care, and we have invested heavily in it."



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