Will Telemedicine be the Next Killer App?

At the American Telemedicine Association's annual meeting recently the results of a national survey were revealed. The survey of health care and information technology professionals, sponsored by Intel, found that a majority of decision makers believe that the emergence of telehealth will have a major role in improving the care for the globally aging population, aka the "baby boomers."

According to the study telehealth solutions, which deliver health-related services and information via telecommunications and computing technologies, are currently used by two-thirds of health care professionals with an 87 percent satisfaction rate. These professionals believe that improved patient care and outcomes, more complete clinician access to patient data and early identification of health issues are some of the biggest perceived advantages for telemedicine adoption.

I believe the average American would agree that staying with our current "reactive" health care system approach cannot be sustained for much longer and there is an increasing need to change to a more "proactive" model - one that more closely represents what is best for a patient, in addition to providing medical professionals with the most current patient data.

Although there are arguments against moving toward telemedicine, such as the current methods of reimbursement and the apprehension about learning a new technology, according to the study, there already is a strong movement evolving to make telemedicine become a reality.

Enter "wireless communications." The convergence of wireless technology, social networking and medicine could definitely change the direction of health care in a positive way. Wireless medical devices have already demonstrated that they can improve health care, ensure more personalized treatment and reduce the margin of error. Plus provide the extra benefits of reducing costs and saving time for doctors and nurses.

The California Healthcare Foundation, a think tank, estimates that two-thirds of American physicians already have smart phones. And more than one-third of doctors are using a software program for mobile devices and laptops that provides instant information on drug interactions, treatment recommendations etc. In the future, this software will be able to access electronic health records (EHRs) via mobile devices – predicted to be the next "killer" wireless application.

Wireless health care devices are becoming "omnipresent" in hospitals according to Kalorama Information, a market research firm. It estimates that the market for such devices and services in the US alone will grow from $2.7 billion in 2007 to $9.6 billion in 2012. Telemedicine has already created changes in today's health care industry by moving care from the hospital to the home in certain situations achieving more patient centered care while at the same time reducing costs. Not to

mention providing the opportunity for patients to return to their own homes surrounded by family and friends.

I have witnessed first hand what this means to elderly people who are dealing with multiple chronic conditions, and the anxiety it causes when a prolonged hospital stay forces a separation between two people.

Research has shown that the majority of consumers, health care professionals as well as service providers are in favor of implementing telehealth models. There are many advantages, few tradeoffs and everyone benefits. I hope the industry moves swiftly to find solutions to overcome whatever obstacles exist with implementing telehealth models, resulting in improved patient care while at the same time lightening the load on our health care system.

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