

Telehealth: The next great frontier for locum tenens?

By Hunter Smith, VP, Workforce Solutions

When evaluating the economic impact of COVID-19 on America, it's safe to say the healthcare system has not been immune to the pandemic's far-reaching effects. Intuitively, one would assume that increased admissions equates to more hospital revenue. Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services (CMS) has done its part to alleviate the financial burden to hospitals through the CARES Act, an expansion of the Accelerated and Advanced Payment Program and payment rates through new COVID-19 testing CPT codes. However, the upside isn't enough to offset lost revenue from the closure of elective procedures and outpatient services.

One industry within healthcare that has experienced the inverse effect of this pandemic is telehealth, with most major companies reporting exponential growth since March. Per [Medscape](#), "As early as the end of March, PlushCare saw a 70% increase in appointments, and Amwell (formerly American Well) saw use of its app rise 158%." In a recent discussion with Doctor on Demand CEO, Hill Ferguson, he acknowledged the unprecedented growth and is convinced that while the surge in demand may not sustain at the current levels, telehealth is here to stay. "It wouldn't surprise me after the pandemic subsides if telehealth proved to be the 'new first step' in diagnostics prior to patients visiting certain outpatient centers." One Texas psychiatrist who adopted the "new normal" of treating patients through Zoom corroborated this, and said he believes this model would provide more access to care for patients. However, he tempered the enthusiasm of telehealth by stating it would not ultimately replace outpatient behavioral health services since it's required by law that he must physically treat his patients in person once a year in Texas. Depending on how long the pandemic lasts, this is something that could potentially be re-evaluated.

It's no secret that our healthcare system struggles with staffing. The disparity between the supply of available providers and the demand of those needing care has only grown over the last decade. How are these telehealth companies capable of meeting their demand? One solution provided by our government is the [allowance of H-1B Visa physicians to now practice telemedicine](#). However, Hill Ferguson states that supply has not proven to be an obstacle just yet. Not only has Doctor On Demand been able to keep up with the demand, but there is a "line of doctors out the door ranging from primary care to various subspecialties" who are waiting for the chance to practice via the Doctor on Demand platform. He acknowledged the use of locum tenens for the first few weeks of the pandemic to meet the initial surge, but since then, he has benefitted from the surplus of physicians who are out of work and seeking an outlet to generate income. With the expansion of telehealth reimbursements via the 1135 Waiver, [telemedicine companies can pay top dollar](#) to attract the talent they need to meet the sudden growth.

Looking forward, we will get past this pandemic. Many of the benefits offered by CMS to encourage telehealth, such as the 1135 Waiver, are in place only temporarily to manage through the pandemic. So, the question remains what the future holds for telehealth post COVID-19. One immeasurable benefit to telehealth companies over the course of the pandemic is consumer adoption. Many people, who otherwise may never have utilized telehealth, were forced to adopt. Will the ease of use and flexibility to the consumer help to sustain the demand for these services? If so, once the large supply of out-of-work physicians returns full time to their practices, how will these companies continue to meet the demand for their services? The obvious solution is the utilization of contingent labor, much like other traditional healthcare institutions. Could telehealth be the next great frontier for locum tenens? It seems we'll find out sooner rather than later.