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Opinion

Utility and Advantages of Telemedicine within Orthopaedics

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The advent of telemedicine has taken the medical field by storm over the last half-century. The specialty of Orthopaedic Surgery is no exception to this development; Orthopaedic teleconsultation has proven to be highly useful and advantageous to its associated healthcare providers and target patient populations. Extending bone and joint care access to underserved demographics, eliminating cumbersome drawbacks of in-person office visits, and providing health professionals with means of offering remote musculoskeletal health services at their convenience are the main advantages of telemedicine within Orthopaedics. Telemedicine has emerged as a force to revolutionize the delivery of healthcare across all medical specialties; however, Orthopaedic Surgery in particular is a field that stands to benefit extraordinarily from integration of remote technological modalities into provision of care.

Limited access to bone and joint care in underserved populations remains a pervasive issue within large subsets of the overall Orthopaedic patient population. Many of these patients are not within physical range of an Orthopaedic surgeon or do not have the means to obtain access to care for themselves and their families. Telemedicine represents a reliable alternative to an in-person consultation for such individuals without sacrificing the quality of care rendered. Through the use of a desktop or mobile electronic device and an internet connection, patients are enabled to seek the counsel of a health professional from the comfort of their present location. This dramatically ameliorates care efforts for patients for whom a visit to an Orthopaedic office is an impossibility.

Remote treatment of musculoskeletal ailments is an additional component of care that has been repeatedly shown to improve clinical outcomes at rates that are comparable to those of in-person visits to the doctor. These advantages of Orthopaedic teleconsultations specifically underscore the utility of telemedicine with respect to underserved patient demographics.

Modern patients are largely receptive to the conveniences offered by telemedicine. Avoiding the commute to a physician's office or hospital is an attractive proposition for patients with a reliable connection to the internet at home. Not having to experience wait times created by administrative healthcare delivery systems allows both patients and providers to be more efficient in their respective roles. This portends to the fact that wait times and commute times are often far greater in combination than the time it takes for an Orthopaedist to clinically evaluate a patient. In addition, telemedical consultation allows patients and their providers to participate in healthcare efforts outside of regular business hours, thereby further boosting access to care.

Within Orthopaedics, it is important to note that the quality of care rendered via teleconsultation has been demonstrated to remain comparable to that of the in-person visit. In fact, rates of attendance for patient appointments and avoidance of emergency healthcare settings are usually higher among patients using telemedical means of interacting with their providers compared to those visiting the doctor. Orthopaedic surgeons are able to make assessments and decisions for patients in the perioperative context via remote electronic means almost as effectively as they would through physical examination. Determination of wound infections or properly healing incisions and fractures by professionals is easily made through high-definition video streaming. Furthermore, methods of remote surgery are being engineered that are intended to simplify routine Orthopaedic operations. Robotic and computer-assisted surgery are among the existing frontiers showing promise for this type of initiative.

A final point regarding telemedicine and Orthopaedics has to do with enhancement of provider compensation. Given that these surgeons are typically only reimbursed for time spent operating on patients, pre- and postoperative care efforts are usually done without financial incentives for the provision of high-quality care. Telemedicine stands to increase the efficiency of perioperative musculoskeletal care by reducing the average amount of time per outpatient encounter and providing electronic modalities of prescribing medications. A convenience fee can also be charged in place of travel, leave of absence, or long wait-time expenditures on the part of patients. These novel protocols stand to incentivize high-quality care by ensuring that the surgeon is paid for postoperative follow-up appointments that last much shorter than the typical outpatient visit.

Although a multitude of barriers presently exist to complete assimilation of telemedical Orthopaedic healthcare delivery efforts into the present standard of care, online-video visits to the doctor have shown great promise in promoting access to care without compromising quality. Ease of accessibility to care is perhaps the single greatest benefit of telemedicine overall and Orthopaedics is certainly no stranger to the growing movement. Disrupting the traditional model of perioperative and non-operative musculoskeletal treatment with respect to patient commutes, wait times, and sacrificed work-days is the end result of this endeavor. Orthopaedic surgeons are empowered through telemedicine in terms of having greater control over scheduled monitoring of patients. Lastly, telemedicine within Orthopaedics has shown potential in overcoming uncompensated, un-incentivized perioperative rendering of care. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the practice of "telemedicine" within Orthopaedics - as with many other clinical specialties – may very well be referred to in the future simply as "medicine".

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