

TREND BRIEF — PAYERS

## Rethinking the Role of Nurses in On-Demand Telehealth

Telehealth—and telehealth nurses—aren't new. Nurses have been guiding and caring for health plan members via nurse advice lines and nurse-provided phone triage for years. But as on-demand, 24/7 telehealth utilization has grown (and now stabilized), it's time to revisit the role of a registered nurse.

The COVID-19 crisis has proven that on-demand consumer telehealth can improve access to care. But the need for and volume of telehealth visits has also at times threatened to overwhelm the virtual care delivery system. Most on-demand services are “quarterbacked” by physicians in today's ecosystem. A member clicks to connect, answers a few text-based questions, then joins the queue for an MD e-consult. As telehealth becomes even more popular, that model is neither the most efficient nor sustainable.

This is where nurses can play a crucial role. In the following brief, we outline three ways they can make an impact right away.



# Let's consider the value of putting nurses on the frontlines of telehealth.

## ① Efficient care at a lower cost

By leveraging experienced telehealth registered nurses (RNs) prior to a virtual physician e-consult, health plans can ensure effectively triaged care and help members seek the appropriate setting for that care. At Carenet Health, our data has shown that at least 40% of telehealth visits don't require physician interaction and can be treated at home with guidance from an RN. Nurse-provided patient triage can not only alleviate some of the burden on physicians who are already stretched thin, but also help patients avoid unnecessary emergency, urgent and primary care visits—which significantly reduces costs. In fact, Carenet data also shows that patients are wrong about the level of care they need about 70% of the time.

→ **Proof in point:** One large health plan implemented symptom triage delivered by RNs prior to a virtual physician consult. Of symptomatic callers with pre-intent to visit the emergency department (ED), 87% were redirected to a less emergent level of care. Only 20% of calls resulted in the RN referring the patient to the on-demand telehealth physician service. The health plan also saw \$12 million in annual savings, which amounted to an average savings of \$100 per interaction per member.



of symptomatic callers with pre-intent to visit ED redirected to a less emergent level of care



of all symptomatic callers redirected to a more appropriate level of care



of calls resulted in the RN referring patient to the on-demand telehealth physician service



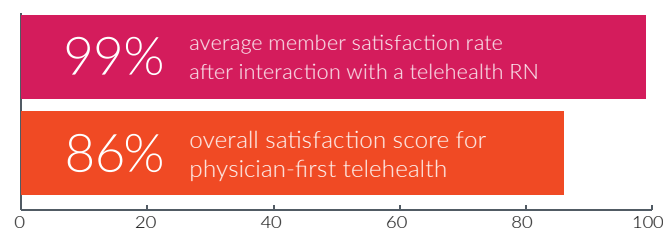
patient satisfaction rate

## ② Improved member experience

Long wait times are always a drawback for patients, no matter where they're seeking care. While telehealth has helped reduce the inconvenience of traveling and waiting in a doctor's office or ED to be seen, it hasn't eliminated it. A study published in the *Journal of Patient Experience* found the average wait time for online physician visits was 75.5 minutes. Some patients experienced wait times as high as almost four hours.<sup>1</sup> A dedicated nurse triage team could be a path to improving that experience by engaging with health plan members prior to their wait for an MD—providing more convenient access to 24/7 clinical care.

A single point of access to all forms of virtual care can have an impact, as well. For instance, in the Carenet Health Virtual Clinic model, patients have a streamlined front door to care, similar to a traditional provider clinic. Intake coordinators efficiently handle calls, which are then triaged by telehealth-trained RNs and elevated to physician e-consults when appropriate. The result is a seamless, convenient and stress-reducing experience. Additional types of virtual care could be added to the point of entry, such as crisis behavioral health support.

→ **Proof in point:** One of the nation's largest health plans saw a 96% member telehealth satisfaction rating when they transitioned to an upfront nurse triage solution. At Carenet, the average score across all clients for patient satisfaction after a nurse interaction is 99%. Those figures are 10 and 13 percentage points higher than the overall satisfaction score for physician-first on-demand services, according to the latest study by J.D. Power.<sup>2</sup>



1. Khairat S, Pillai M, Edson B, Gianforcaro R. Evaluating the Telehealth Experience of Patients With COVID-19 Symptoms: Recommendations on Best Practices. *J Patient Exp*. 2020;7(5):665-672. doi:10.1177/2374373520952975.

2. J.D. Power 2020 U.S. Telehealth Satisfaction Study, published October 1, 2020.



### ③ Compassionate, high-quality care

Having a team of experienced nurses available around the clock to assess symptoms and provide site and course of care recommendations can help fuel better member decision-making and better outcomes. One of the keys to those goals is staffing the team with skilled and well-trained clinical professionals. At Carenet, for example, our telehealth RNs have an average of 15 years of clinical experience and 5 years of telehealth experience, and they're trained in empathy, influence, state/federal regulations, URAC standards and how to work with diverse populations.

→ **Proof in point:** A typical physician e-consult can address fewer than 50 types of patient concerns. Triage nurses using Schmitt-Thompson® evidence-based guidelines for telehealth have access to protocols for, and can address, 700 adult and pediatric conditions.

### Telehealth is evolving—the role of nurses should, too

As telehealth becomes more popular, the role of a skilled telehealth nurse is an asset that must be further and more strategically explored. The impact of nurse triage and support is poised to make virtual care more sustainable, cost-effective and satisfying for consumers.

Fortunately, a good first step is a fairly easy one: Consider enhancing your current MD-on-demand solution by adding a proven nurse triage service upfront. [Contact us today](#) if you'd like more information on how that can be accomplished for your organization.

#### About Carenet Health

Carenet Health is the healthcare industry's premier clinical and consumer engagement partner—providing 24/7 telehealth, engagement, clinical support and advocacy solutions on behalf of 250+ health plans, providers, health systems and Fortune 500 companies. More than 86 million healthcare consumers have access to our teams of engagement specialists, care coordinators, RNs and other licensed healthcare professionals each year. Our goal is to share insights and best practices from our work across the industry to help our clients optimize performance and transform the healthcare experience.

#### How can we help your organization?

Email us today at [marketing@carenethealthcare.com](mailto:marketing@carenethealthcare.com), call 800.809.7000 or learn more at [carenethealth.com](http://carenethealth.com).

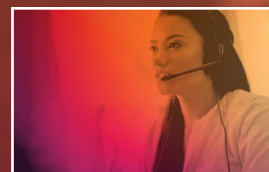
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