



## How a Consumer-Focused, Engaged Telehealth Strategy Can Boost Utilization and Lower Costs

Have you noticed an increase in the number of free standing emergency rooms in your community? How about the number of billboards promoting current wait times at the local ER? When the focus these days is increasingly on lowering health costs, this is both an alarming trend and a misaligned message. Promoting the convenience of heading to the nearest emergency room sends the wrong signal to health care consumers. We are asking insureds to be engaged consumers of health care now more than ever, and the notion of marketing an emergency room based on wait time is likening the ER to your local walk-in hair salon. There's value in having emergency rooms as very important points of care for *true emergencies*, but self-insured employers are risking significant capital if their employees start to view the ER as the most convenient place to see care.

Fortunately, there is another growing trend in health care benefits that can combat the risk of inappropriate ER visits: ET – or Engaged Telehealth. While telehealth is arguably the fastest growing trend in health care, a *deeply engaging* telehealth strategy is the smartest trend in health care and needs to be integrated into every self-insured employer's strategic planning for the future. Organizations usually opt to self-insure to save costs and provide more freedom in plan designs that allow employers to make better use of their health dollars and save money. ET

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is a crucial strategy that drives medical claims down while giving employees more choices in seeking care.

Telehealth gives health care consumers 24/7/365 access to board-certified primary care, internist, and pediatric physicians. The best telehealth partners will provide this access via landline phone, desktop computer and most importantly to increase engagement... through a smartphone app. Let's face it; we live in a world of real-time access to all important information in our life thanks to technology. It's true of banking, travel and retail, so why shouldn't we expect the same for health care? Let's combat the risk of "steerable" emergency room visits by outlining the key characteristics of a best in class telehealth partner.

### **Vital Components for An Effective and Engaging Telehealth Plan**

For telehealth to truly lower claims and costs, first, the technology must be *engaging and easy to access*. Mobile functionality and consumer decision support tools are critical to ensure the patient has access to quality care wherever they are and whenever they need it. For families, the primary insured should be able to access the same quality of care for dependents via the same mobile app, website or phone. There should also be "push" functionality to remind insureds of this benefit along with other health and wellbeing messaging, so it is top of mind when the patient has a care need that can be treated through telehealth.

Reminding employees is warranted since studies show that insureds tend to not keep track of what benefits they have. In fact, a survey conducted by ADP, an HR and payroll services company, discovered that 40%

of employees do not understand their benefits, which is a convincing argument that engagement needs to focus on education. Another survey similarly found that employees don't understand how their behaviors and use of their benefits impact health care cost. That's where transparency, technology and consumerism comes in.

But what does successful engagement look like? As a self-insured organization, make sure that your telehealth partner puts education first to encourage high utilization and engagement. Influencing behavior takes time but also must acknowledge a path to the hearts and minds of the insureds. That path starts with brokers who must engage and educate admins, who in turn must help plan members connect their actions with the money-saving potential of telehealth.

Multiple education outlets targeted to brokers, admins and plan members that articulate the goals and engagement strategy are vital components and keep money-saving as top of mind when individuals are making care decisions. Communication vehicles like on-site trainings, one-on-one webinars, and even pre-recorded webinars, set brokers up to be as effective as possible. Consequently nothing is lost in translation to the organization. An informed broker enhances engagement, impresses the client and improves chances that the plan member will become a full partner in utilization.

The same strategy should be used for admins and members. A telehealth partner that reaches out to employers with phone calls, emails and webinars and provides admins with tools they can in turn use easily for their engagement efforts with their employees is an ideal turnkey approach that keeps everyone aligned toward the same goals.

Today consumerism enters the picture with smartphone apps. More and more people are turning to apps to provide transparency and why not, especially when they are easy and quick to use and make finding relevant information relatively pain-free. For example, if your employees can find better prices for prescriptions and procedures and can then act on that information to make the smartest care choices, isn't that the true definition of a smart health consumer? And, for self-insured organizations, employees know the connection of lesser costs incurred by their employer means cost savings that they'll enjoy themselves one way or another – whether through lower out-of-pocket costs or perhaps a better bottom line that ends up in their paychecks. It's no surprise that the amount an employee cares about saving their employer money is in direct proportion to how it affects their own wallets.

Next, a subscription model telehealth service offering a *\$0 copay model* encourages the patient to use the benefit because they will also save any applicable copay or deductible that would apply to a routine visit to their PCP, Urgent Care or ER. A subscription-based model should not file a medical claim with your self-insured health plan, thus the ROI is shared between both the employee and employer... truly a win/win.

Speaking of ROI, *if you can't measure it, you can't manage it*, should be the philosophy of your telehealth partner (and self-insured medical TPA). A telehealth partner that provides great *utilization reporting* will allow you to truly integrate the utilization data and ROI into your total health & welfare budget. In order to properly assess ROI, make sure you have a detailed analysis of current primary care physician



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(PCP), Urgent Care and ER utilization, including visits per 1000 and total cost per visit (both paid by your plan and by the patient). Your telehealth partner should be able to report on number of consults, type of diagnosis, prescriptions issued, and redirection of care. Also make sure they record the time of day the consults occurred, to help reinforce we live in a 24/7 world; you'll find no argument that the traditional 8am-5pm access to care does not meet the needs of a 21st century health consumer.

When effectively designed and communicated, employers can expect to see a positive ROI within the first 12 months and significant, credible returns by year two and beyond. To effectively measure the return on investment, you want to integrate your telehealth utilization with the same self-insured health plan data points noted above. Effective use of telehealth should result in a significant reduction in ER admits per 1000 and a higher ER cost per visit, signifying appropriate use of the ER for true emergency situations. Finally, the telehealth redirection savings should be compared against the subscription cost to complete the ROI analysis. Engaged telehealth delivers significant ROI to the self-insured plan and the insured employees when managed as part of the overall health care strategy as opposed to a secondary "bolt on".

Employee satisfaction surveys including probability to use again and likeliness to refer a colleague should be expected from your telehealth partner. National averages for telehealth utilization are about 5% of a covered population; however, the strategies outlined can achieve greater than 40% utilization by designing a program that is a win/win for the employer and its employees.



We know the workforce is evolving and attracting Millennials is a critical success factor for all industries. A truly high performing health care benefit plan must be designed to attract and ENGAGE (not just retain!) three distinct generations. We also know that employees are key stakeholder in the success of any self-insured benefit plan. Engaged telehealth provides a great opportunity for employers to deliver a 21st century benefit program that will enable employees to make confident, informed decisions. This is the crux of true consumerism in health care and should be an area of focus for all self-insured employers. Let's save the billboards promoting short wait times for airport security. ■

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