

# Tips for Telemedicine Success



Beyond patient and physician convenience, telemedicine offers numerous benefits for dermatology practices. Here's how to benefit long term.

**BY NAREN ARULRAJAH**

>> Telemedicine technology took center stage due to COVID-19, but it is not a new idea. It has long been available and requested by patients, but doctors have been historically hesitant to make the leap into the virtual world. Now that telehealth implementation has been necessarily accelerated, it is here to stay. One of the best ways to not only cope with this crisis but also prepare for future success is to implement and embrace this technology.

## THE MANY ROLES OF TELEHEALTH IN DERMATOLOGY

**Aesthetic Treatment Planning.** The first appointment might not require physical contact if it is essentially an evaluation and discussion. However, COVID-19 precautions still present unique challenges. Some dermatologists are requiring patients to wear masks throughout the appointment. Others are performing an abbreviated assessment, asking patients to remove the mask but keep their mouths closed. A few are continuing to request patients simulate talking, laughing, and smiling while keeping a safe distance.

When conducting a face to face examination, the more careful examination you perform, the less safe you are. Telehealth video consultations offer another option. You can view the patient from any angle, ask him or her to speak and move naturally, and even (with proper permission and security) record it for future reference. While seeing your patient on a screen might not feel the same, most smartphones have excellent cameras that can provide all the detail you need with zero risk.

**Medical Diagnostics.** You can easily “take a look” at a skin problem in photos or videos, allowing you to begin and probably complete the diagnostic phase virtually and possibly avoid any face-to-face contact. Of course, biopsies and tests require office visits, but you probably do not use them often. As an experienced dermatologist, you recognize most skin conditions on sight. Some information about symptoms is enough to confirm a diagnosis. For simple problems, the treatment might be nothing more than a bit of home care advice and a recommendation for OTC salve.

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**Aftercare and Chronic Condition Management.** Often, post treatment visits are most easily transitioned to telehealth. Maybe your patient is worried about the amount of swelling after a procedure, or perhaps you need to help someone determine the cause of rosacea flareups. These types of appointments typically involve looking, asking the patient a few questions, and dispensing a bit of advice. A video call, or perhaps just a conversation accompanied by some photos, is likely enough. Of course, from there you can schedule an office visit if there happens to be complications or need for additional treatment.

## WHY YOU SHOULD BE PLANNING FOR THE LONG TERM

Given the current situation, the benefits of telehealth are obvious. However, it would be a mistake to think of this technology as temporary. Yes, the COVID-19 crisis will pass. At some point you will be able to see any patient you want in your office. However, some might still be better served with virtual visits. The enduring benefits of telehealth include:

- **Better access to care.** People unable to afford transportation, those in remote areas, and shut-ins are not likely to visit your office, at least not without a very serious need. Telehealth offers an alternative in these and similar situations, which broadens your patient base and improves care for underserved populations.
- **The lure of convenience.** Millennials are known for extensive internet use and love of technology. They are accustomed to banking, shopping, socializing, and even

working online. Now, the generation that grew up online is starting to notice fine lines, wrinkles, unhealthy skin, and other telltale signs of aging. They (and the large percentage of older generations who are internet savvy) want the same level of convenience in dermatological care that they enjoy in other aspects of life.

- **Flexible scheduling.** Maybe you are free for only a couple of hours on Wednesday mornings but commute time makes it impractical to go to the office. Or perhaps you would like to offer weekend and evening appointments for working patients, without the commitment and expense of extending your office hours. Telehealth appointments can be conducted from any location, with minimal preparation.
- **Improve your bottom line.** You might spend many hours on phone calls afterhours, answering questions, and following up with patients. A simple phone call is generally not billable. However, if those calls were converted to telehealth appointments, they would become an additional income source. Furthermore, you can use virtual consultations to increase the number of appointments daily without the expense of expanding your office.
- **Reduce cancellations and attrition.** Some patients do not keep appointments because they are just too busy. Most of them have good intentions but, much like a gym membership, they know they are likely to cancel. If a simple, convenient, virtual consultation is available, they will probably choose that option upfront—and be much more likely to keep the appointment.
- **Improve patient satisfaction.** People like options. They also like the confidence of having a care provider who is progressive and at the forefront of technology. Offering a range of telehealth services gives them both. Of course, when patient satisfaction goes up, your attrition rate goes down.
- **Consult at your convenience.** Live video appointments are an excellent tool and often necessary. However, some very simple diagnostics and follow-ups can be com-

### Do This Now

Invest in the proper technology. Temporarily relaxed HIPAA enforcement allows FaceTime appointments, but these are not ideal. Transition to a full-featured, HIPAA-compliant, user-friendly telehealth platform so that your services will not be interrupted when full enforcement resumes.

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pleted without real time interaction. Known as store-and-forward, this method allows the patient to send photographs and information for your review. You can complete these cases afterhours, during slow moments in the office, or any time that fits in your schedule.

### TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY

It is nearly impossible to navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic without the assistance of virtual patient appointments. Moreover, once patients experience the simplicity and efficiency of telehealth, they will come to expect it.

While temporarily relaxed HIPAA enforcement is a blessing right now, don't settle for FaceTime appointments. Work on making the transition to a full-featured, HIPAA-compliant, user-friendly telehealth platform so that your services will not be interrupted when full enforcement resumes. Take this as an opportunity to become a leader in high-tech dermatology and futureproof your practice. ■

*Want to learn more about integrating telehealth or marketing during the pandemic? Contact Naren at 855-598-3320 for a no-cost strategy session. Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dermatologists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more.*