Four Tips for Integrating Telehealth Into Nephrology Practices

Below are practical tips for nephrology offices starting or strengthening telehealth options during the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Note: The suggestions below reflect the revised 2020 Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) telehealth regulations as of April 29, 2020 enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the most up-to-date telehealth regulations, please visit www.cms.gov.

Tip 1: Advertise and Engage Patients In Telehealth Services

- Remind patients that kidney care is essential during this public health emergency to avoid unnecessary complications or hospitalizations.
- Talk about available telehealth outpatient visit options, such as the nephrologist rounding via video conference for three of the four weekly clinic encounters or the monthly home dialysis visit, to gain buy-in for virtual visits.
- Prepare staff to listen to then address patient questions about telehealth services (e.g., how to download an application on a phone or computer, how to troubleshoot issues, how to prepare for an appointment) or concerns about how a nephrology telehealth appointment would work.
- Reschedule patient appointments to telehealth visits in a positive way. Inform patients that the practice will now be conducting telehealth appointments by video or phone due to the COVID-19 virus. Given the unpredictable timeline of the pandemic, waiting for an in-person visit is not recommended.

Tip 2: Support Team Members When Implementing New Telehealth Services

- Have patience when adjusting the clinical workflows. With new scheduling and billing practices, all staff will be shifting their routine to support the nephrology practice.
- Write custom clinical workflows with step-by-step instructions for each team member's role. And remember, there is no such thing as a too detailed clinical workflow!
- Nominate telehealth leads to support all other clinical and office staff during telehealth appointments. Workflows are necessary and having a designated point person is helpful.

Tip 3: Determine What Is Needed to Expand Telehealth Services

- Train staff in technology and new equipment where necessary to accommodate a growing telehealth practice. Health information technology (IT) also may be in greater demand in a telehealth work environment.
- Stay up to date with HIPAA requirements; CMS has temporarily relaxed HIPAA requirements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Telehealth services can now be conducted on audio-visual platforms such as FaceTime, Skype, or Zoom.
- Consider using an audio-visual platform for telehealth services that is HIPAA-compliant and integrated into the current EMR/PM system to benefit long-term use.
- Survey other telehealth vendor options outside of your EMR/PM system. For a comprehensive list of telehealth vendor options, contact your Regional Telehealth Resource Center.

Tip 4: Prepare for Long-Term Use of Telehealth Services

- Reflect on whether patients or clinical practice staff members may enjoy telehealth services offered routinely in the future.
- Explore what staffing or equipment resources would be needed to sustain or expand telehealth. New equipment, such as remote patient monitoring kits, could be used in future telehealth opportunities.

Want to hear from the nephrology Chief Financial and Operations Officer who inspired these tips? Listen to the ESRD NCC's Quickinar on *Operationalizing Telehealth at the Nephrology Practice* at https://youtu.be/sz2xwFJlpvU.

HIPAA = Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, EMR = Electronic medical record, PM = Patient management