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ViewPoint: Mass. Telemedicine Laws Should Reflect New Reality

John Erwin, Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals

This will be a year of significant change here in Massachusetts. A new governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and treasurer, as well as significant changes in legislative and business community leadership, will provide opportunities to build on the considerable progress made on containing health care costs in the commonwealth.

To date, much of the cost-containment focus has been on how we pay for health care. However, the way in which we deliver health care is changing rapidly and offers real opportunity for containing costs while enhancing both access to and quality of care. One such area is telemedicine — the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another through electronic communications. Telemedicine includes a growing variety of applications and services using two-way video, email, smartphones, wireless tools and other forms of telecommunications technology to connect patients with their health care providers and exchange critical information. Teaching hospitals, both nationally and in Massachusetts, have led the way and been on the forefront of telemedicine initiatives. A recent national study found that while adoption of telemedicine varies greatly by state and hospital, the teaching status of a hospital is an indicator of greater adoption of telemedicine.

Here in the Boston area, we have seen exciting new initiatives ranging from virtual house calls and remote-specialist consultations to the use of robots to assist when patients are discharged to their home.

While Massachusetts has taken some steps to enable the practice of telemedicine, much more needs to be done. In the past three years, the number of states enacting telemedicine "parity" laws requiring payers to cover telemedicine services as they would in person services has doubled. Unfortunately, Massachusetts is not one of the 21 states with such a parity law in place. By requiring parity, patients and physicians would be provided the flexibility to determine what method of care delivery works best for them and their unique needs.

Another important step is to enable clinicians, within their scope of practice, to be credentialed to provide telemedicine services and for physicians to practice telemedicine between different states. Laws and regulations that never anticipated the promise of telemedicine must be updated to reflect a new reality.

Telemedicine has been shown to reduce the cost of health care and increase efficiency through better management of chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes and hypertension; shared health professional staffing; reduced travel times; increased patient satisfaction and fewer or shorter hospital stays. It is time that Massachusetts embrace what was once unimagined and enact laws and update regulations to foster and encourage greater use of telemedicine, benefiting the patients, families and the entire health care system.

John Erwin is executive director of the Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals.