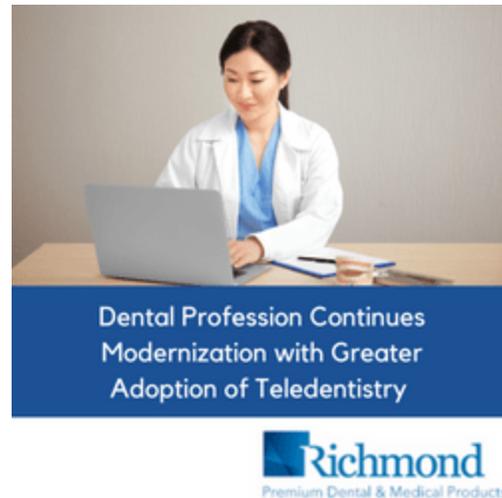


Dental Profession Continues Modernization with Greater Adoption of Teledentistry



As with all fields of healthcare, technology is having a heavy influence on the dental profession. While dentists have already been adopting electronic dental records technology, which integrates everything from billing records to X-rays and exam charts, now we are seeing the dental practice adopt technology in ways that directly impact patient care, and for the better. The advent of teledentistry, also known as telemedicine in dentistry, is such a phenomenon.

What Is Teledentistry?

As its name implies, teledentistry is a method of treating patients via electronic means, creating a virtual clinic. Using a foundational videoconferencing technology, dental clinicians can see patients in real time, where they can screen, record, triage, diagnose, and order care to be performed, either at a subsequent visit, a satellite treatment site, or another remote location.

The advent of teledentistry will address some of the most pressing public health needs related to dental care. Rural populations, among the poorest and most underserved by the American dental community, can now receive cost-effective treatment via dental telehealth methods.

2018: The ADA Jumps In

The American Dental Association has responded to advances in the underlying technology, as well as the willingness of major payers, especially Medicaid, to take a fresh look at reimbursement for virtual diagnostics and treatments via telemedicine. In fact, the year 2018 marks the first time that the ADA will include telemedicine codes in its Code on Dental Procedures and Nomenclature (CDT).

The addition of teledentistry codes will naturally promote the practice of exchanging medical information via electronic means, so that dentists can achieve the same outcomes from virtual visits--equally tangible in nature--as they do with physical visits to their clinics. Due to the cheaper expense and connectivity involved, the rise of teledentistry will attack both rising cost structures confined to the physical clinic experience, as well as access problems in rural regions all over the country.

Medicaid: the Ideal Test Lab for Teledentistry

Since Medicaid and its complementary CHIP program for children cover nearly 20 percent of Americans, with eligibility determined by income tests, the programs offer the perfect testing labs for teledentistry to thrive and grow into other populations. Since states are free to experiment within the block federal grants of Medicaid, nearly all (48 states and the District of Columbia) have begun covering telemedicine, and many states, through their departments of insurance, are requiring private plans to cover telehealth services as well. While this accounts for more traditional medical practice, teledentistry is following closely, with several states passing and considering legislation to require reimbursement from both public and private plans for teledentistry.

Technology Companies Drive Access, Efficiency in Teledentistry

A pair of technology companies, Virtual Dental Care and MouthWatch, are on the leading edge of implementation of teledentistry for practitioners. The software services typically integrate multiple technologies, including live streaming, videoconferencing, intraoral camera integration, store-and-forward exams, and electronic health records capabilities.

Perhaps the best aspect of this convergence of technology and care is that it creates a “treat from anywhere” dynamic. Technology suites like Virtual Dental Care and MouthWatch make dentistry mobile; thus, a dental professional could travel to places where people live and gather, such as nursing homes, churches, and community centers, performing cleanings, taking pictures with an intraoral camera, and communicating with other professionals via a secure, HIPAA-compliant portal to make the diagnosis and recommend treatments.

Cost Alignments Coming into Focus

As with almost every other aspect of our healthcare, teledentistry will only become ubiquitous when financial forces align with the technology involved. The more dental practices see their services reimbursed with money coming in the door, and the more efficiencies they see in utilizing these tools to prevent unnecessary costs taking money out the door, everyone--practices, practitioners, patients, and payers--wins through dental telehealth.