Improving access to care through telemedicine

Key Points

- **Increase the number of telemedicine services authorized by Medicare** – Medicare beneficiaries, especially those in rural communities throughout Minnesota, could have greater access to a wider array of services if Medicare would expand its scope of covered telemedicine services. Medicare has routinely increased the number of health care services that can be provided to beneficiaries via telemedicine technology. So long as Medicare continues to adhere to an enumerated list of allowable services, the agency should be encouraged to continue to update and expand the list every year to keep pace with available technology to support providers’ use of telemedicine.

- **Expand the types of providers authorized to deliver care via telemedicine** – Medicare places unusually restrictive parameters around the types of providers who can treat patients via telemedicine. Many easily and efficiently available services from audiology to mental health therapy could be available to beneficiaries if Medicare would allow the professionals who deliver those services in face-to-face encounters every day to provide the same quality of care via telemedicine. Medicare should allow any provider acting within his/her scope of practice to deliver services via telemedicine.

- **Eliminate artificial geographic barriers to telemedicine** – Medicare’s rules preclude the use of telemedicine if the patient receiving care is located in a non-rural location. While telemedicine’s power to expand access to care in rural communities is real, there is also the need to provide access to specialists and services for patients in non-rural communities. For example, a senior living in long-term care in Duluth could receive primary, mental health and specialty care services via telemedicine without the burden and expense of traveling to a clinic or hospital. Despite having such technology readily available, Minnesota’s seniors must travel or be transported via ambulance unnecessarily because Medicare does not allow them to receive the benefits of telemedicine unless they are located in a rural area.

 Federal action requested

- Support greater adoption and reimbursement of telemedicine as a means of delivering care to Medicare beneficiaries by:
  1. increasing the number of services Medicare allows to be delivered via telemedicine;
  2. expanding the types of providers who can deliver services via telemedicine; and
  3. eliminating artificial geographic restrictions on the use of telemedicine.
Background

Minnesota hospitals and health systems are rapidly increasing the number and types of services they provide through telemedicine technology. Consumers who are increasingly accustomed to online retail transactions, Skyping or Facetiming with their grandchildren, and using Internet-connected televisions expect and want health care services that are more convenient, accessible and affordable. Telemedicine technology allows health care providers to meet this demand while ensuring equal or better quality of care, reducing overall costs of care, mitigating growing workforce shortages, and decreasing the burdens and expenses associated with traveling to receive care.

Today, Minnesota’s hospitals and health systems are harnessing technology to deliver emergency, stroke, dermatology, rheumatology, psychiatry, diabetes care management, patient monitoring, toxicology, and even cardiac-related services to patients. Many of these services would not be available to patients without extensive time and expense of traveling long distances, significant delays in receiving care that could be life-saving, and substantial amounts of time away from their jobs, families and local communities.

Unfortunately, Medicare’s policies with respect to telemedicine are not keeping up with technology or the needs of patients. By limiting which telemedicine services can be offered to Medicare beneficiaries, by excluding numerous types of providers who are otherwise able to deliver services face-to-face from offering the same services through telemedicine, and by preventing beneficiaries in non-rural locations from receiving any health care through telemedicine, Medicare is restricting the innovation and ability of providers to leverage technology to make health care more accessible, timely, convenient, affordable and even higher quality for Minnesota’s seniors.