



CHA Supports HB 2508 Permanent Extension of Telehealth Pay Parity

The quick adoption and utilization of telehealth was one of the surprising positive outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was made possible by the immediate action of the State and health plans to remove key barriers to primary care utilization of telehealth and, importantly, to reimburse providers at parity to in-person visits.

While most insurers have extended payment parity for telehealth visits through June 2021, a commitment to **permanent telehealth parity** must be made **to enable patients to maintain continuity of care through visits with their provider and medical home team**. Experiences over the past year have demonstrated that telehealth will continue to be used by primary care practices as an accessible way to supplement the patient's needs through the medical home. In fact, now that patients and families have experienced the ease and convenience of quality care with their child's pediatrician through telehealth, it will be a necessary visit option to meet the expectations and needs of patients. ***If health plans do not adapt to the new environment by allowing patients to access care from their home and paying medical home providers at parity, telehealth visits will revert to disconnected care provided by urgent care or stand-alone telehealth providers with no continuity or medical history, and often very limited pediatric expertise.***

Telehealth often helps with the barrier of transportation to the office visit, especially for families who cannot get to the office, or have to use public transportation with multiple children.

-Dr. Jennifer Soden, Evergreen Pediatric Clinic

Telehealth helps providers promote the medical home model. It offers PCPs extended opportunity to serve our patients and allows continuity of care with the patients and care team – something that is lost when patients go to urgent care centers.

-Dr. Michael Ericksen, Sunset Pediatrics

COVID-19 presented a challenge to primary care when offices had to limit in-person visits and think creatively about methods to see their patients in this time of crisis. Children were especially vulnerable to missing important milestone visits with their pediatrician. Telehealth visits consisting of live two-way video, telephone, and other virtual modes allowed our pediatric practices to address important medical needs in a timely manner and connect with patients and families at a time of increased stress. The addition of telehealth services has allowed providers the flexibility to provide care in the safest and most effective manner, while determining the most appropriate setting to treat their young patients. While many conditions can be diagnosed and treated over telehealth visits, providers continue to utilize clinical judgement to bring patients into the office when needed for additional follow-up, lab work, or immunizations.

However, this adaptation to telehealth did not come easily for most practices. Our pediatric practices had to rapidly access HIPAA-compliant technology, develop effective workflows, and train staff on new protocols. Telehealth visits often take more provider time than in-person visits; especially when a

The trusting relationship I have built with my patients allows for the effective delivery of telehealth services.

-Dr. Jim Bluhm, Pediatric Associates of the Northwest

There are a lot of pieces in the telehealth workflow that we continue to refine, but refining doesn't necessarily mean fewer steps. While the visit itself is getting easier,



provider's schedule combines telehealth visits with in-person visits to enhance continuity of care. While stand-alone providers of telehealth services might deliver services with minimal structural needs, telehealth services delivered by the Medical Home are far more effective for the patient. With increased costs and provider time required, practices will not be able to continue telehealth visits in the future if payment parity is eliminated.

Continuity with the Medical Home

The Medical Home represents the entire care team built around supporting families and their children with primary care. Telehealth improves access to the medical home by allowing families to conveniently meet with members of their care team. By having more flexible schedules as well as not requiring the patient to go into the office, families are better able to access care and continue coordination, planning, and monitoring with their trusted primary care team – the team they have a relationship with. Telehealth visits have been highly utilized for behavioral health visits and have been found to be an effective way to engage patients. Adolescents have been especially receptive and open to meeting over telehealth. Parity and ability to continue to provide behavioral health services via video *and* phone will be critical to supporting behavioral health needs of children. Enhancement and support of the Medical Home is a key priority for Oregon, and payment parity for telehealth is a critical element of the support needed to keep patients' care within the Medical Home setting.

Telehealth has definitely enhanced the connection of Medical Home team members to some patients that may not have been reached before. One example is a 17-year-old young lady that was scheduled by her mother with her pediatrician for possible anxiety. After others left the visit, the teen was able to engage from home and feel safe talking to a behavioral health provider about her struggles. The ability for this to happen in a coordinated and timely manner demonstrates the advantage of an integrated Medical Home team, now supported even more with the addition of telemedicine!

-Chelsea Kaye, LCSW, Metropolitan Pediatrics Beaverton

Decreasing total health care costs

Preventive care, including acute visits with the primary care provider, has been shown to decrease emergency department visits and hospitalizations and correspondingly, health care costs.¹ Because telehealth offers a convenient alternative to the emergency department for patients and the opportunity for increased coordination of care and follow-up, the pediatrician is able to offer a timely and convenient visit to assess the needs of the patient, often eliminating the need to utilize more costly healthcare services.

I have a family with multiple medical and social issues who go to the emergency room frequently despite everything we have done. I was recently able to prevent another Emergency Department visit for acute abdominal pain by doing a telemedicine visit. I directed the parent to do the abdominal exam and created a plan for follow up. Big win!

-Dr. Sharlene Matthieu, East Portland Pediatric Clinic

Increasing quality of care

Both video and phone telehealth visits allow pediatricians to connect more deeply with their patients and better understand family dynamics, which is critical to developing long-term trusting relationships.



Many of our pediatricians have shared the value of seeing the child in their home environment because it provides further insight into family dynamics, the family's social situation, and the child's development. Additionally, access to care has improved as providers are able to perform video or phone visits to better reach families who struggle to come into the office due to school and work schedules, limited access to transportation, or other barriers to care. The accessibility of all modalities of telehealth tends to decrease missed appointments, increase medication adherence, and improve management of chronic illnesses.²

During a 4-year-old well child visit, a mom mentioned her child was reading. The 4-year-old read and showed me the pictures like it was story time. During these visits, we are able to view the home environment, see how a child interacts with their family in their own home and watch their development as they play or ambulate without them even knowing.

-Dr. Sandy Sequeira, Metropolitan Pediatrics

Increasing patient satisfaction

Telehealth has made scheduling appointments with providers more convenient for patients. Many providers have found that families who previously missed appointments have been more consistent with their virtual visits. Telehealth has been found to decrease wait times, increase access to care, and improve communication with providers.² Many parents and patients have shared how much more they enjoy telehealth visits.

A mother told me herself: "To be honest the virtual visits are way easier and more convenient. I work three jobs from home now. My child is able to navigate it this way and I can keep working. So if that's an option moving forward we will keep the visits going!"

-Megan Polamalu Gordon, Clackamas & Oregon Pediatrics

Telehealth Parity in Other States

During this pandemic, private and public insurers have committed to paying for telehealth services at parity. This has allowed pediatric practices to develop telehealth as an important delivery mode much faster than they had previously planned. This alternative delivery of services by the medical home is here to stay. Public and private health insurers in Oregon must commit to continue paying for telehealth at parity permanently to support new delivery models in the primary care office. Oregon's neighbors, California and Washington, have recently changed their regulations for private insurers, requiring them to pay at parity in all future contracts. In October 2019, California passed Assembly Bill 744 which requires contracts between private insurers and providers to reimburse at parity for the same telehealth and in-person service.³ This law has allowed for the expansion of telehealth across many disciplines and increased access to healthcare. In Washington, Senate Bill 5385 was passed in March of 2020 to ensure that contracts between private insurers and providers starting in 2021 pay at parity for the same synchronous telehealth and in-person services.⁴ Oregon needs to join its neighboring states by passing legislation to expand parity of telehealth services, and health plans should extend their telehealth parity policies recognizing the high value care telehealth services provides when delivered by the medical home.

What Oregon Pediatricians and the Families They Serve Need Now

Telehealth parity has enabled pediatricians to continue to provide accessible and high quality care to their patients during the pandemic, and the results have exceeded expectations. Temporary extensions of telehealth payment parity have allowed for providers to develop and continue vital services during the pandemic, but a permanent commitment must be made to continue these services as part of the future of primary care. Telehealth is here to stay, and will remain a necessary option in all medical homes - an option that allows patients to maintain continuity of care with their medical home, decreases overall health care costs, increases the quality of care, and increases patient satisfaction. Telehealth must continue to be supported through permanent payment parity. **We urge you to permanently extend payment parity for telehealth services to maintain this high quality delivery of service through HB 2508 Telehealth Pay Parity.**

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The Children's Health Alliance (CHA) is an association of over 125 pediatric primary care providers in the Portland/Vancouver/Salem metropolitan area. CHA pediatricians care for approximately 140,000 children and are committed to improving the health of all Oregon's children.

Citations

1. American Academy of Pediatrics, *Overview of Data Related to the Pediatric Medical Home*. July 9, 2016. https://www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/practicesupport_data_pedatric_medical_home.pdf
2. Kruse et. al., *Telehealth and Patient Satisfaction: A systematic review and narrative analysis*. 2017. <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/7/8/e016242>
3. California State Assembly Bill No. 744. October 13, 2019. http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB744
4. Washington State Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5385. March 19, 2020. <http://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2019-20/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/Senate/5385-S.SL.pdf>