Telemedicine and the Potential for Expanded Access to Reproductive Health Care

With technology enhancing so many aspects of modern life, it is time to examine how technology can improve access to reproductive health care and potentially improve health outcomes. In this brief, we will explore how telemedicine is already being used in reproductive and maternal health care.

What is Telemedicine?

Telemedicine is the use of telecommunications technology to deliver health services to patients remotely and to facilitate information exchange among health care providers and between providers and patients. It might seem complicated and futuristic, but it is simple and is actually in use right now. For example, telemedicine includes video conferencing, telephone calls, online patient portals, and the exchange of medical documents and still images. All of these technologies are familiar and utilized daily - telemedicine simply applies these technologies to the practice of health care.

Using Telemedicine to Improve Reproductive Health Care Access

Telemedicine has great potential to expand access to important health services and ultimately enhance health outcomes. In particular, telemedicine can be used to overcome geographical barriers and to reduce the cost of healthcare.

For instance, telemedicine can aid women in rural areas, where women are more likely to experience reproductive health disparities. These women are less likely to receive mammograms, cervical cancer screening, and prenatal care, and are more likely to have low birth weight babies and experience infant mortality. Telemedicine could increase their access to health care services by eliminating the need for expensive and time-consuming travel and by connecting them to specialists or providers that can cater to their specific needs.

Barriers to health care also exist for women living in underserved urban areas. In a study done on the impact of language as a barrier to effective health care in an urban Hispanic community, limited English proficiency was negatively correlated to patient satisfaction and compliance with medical guidance. For non-English speakers, telemedicine may be able to provide access to providers who speak their language, improving their compliance with medical instructions, their overall satisfaction, and their health outcomes.

Many communities are already using these technologies to improve reproductive health and are enjoying the results.

Access to Contraception

Telemedicine has the potential to increase access to contraception in a variety of ways. For example, Planned Parenthood’s Easy Scripts program allows women to sign up online to receive three cycles of their current contraceptive (pills, patches, or rings) in the mail every 10 weeks. Women only need to visit their health care provider for an annual exam. This program eliminates unnecessary medical visits and makes contraception that much more convenient to obtain and use.
Access to Abortion

Telemedicine can be utilized to increase abortion access by making medication abortion (abortion using mifepristone and misoprostol pills) more available to those who do not live near a provider. Iowa was the first state to pioneer a telemedicine abortion access program. A woman seeking medication abortion via telemedicine first has an ultrasound by a trained technician and then receives information and counseling about medication abortion. Next, a physician steps in via teleconference, reviews the woman’s medical history and ultrasound images, and remotely opens a drawer at the clinic containing the two-pill regimen. The woman swallows the first pill under the doctor’s supervision and is instructed to take the second pill at a later time at home.\textsuperscript{vi}

Women in this program reported being satisfied with this procedure because of the convenience of receiving abortion services closer to home and earlier in pregnancy.\textsuperscript{vi} Medication abortions increased by 8% and, overall, early abortion encounters increased by 1.7% as a result of this program, but surgical abortions after 13 weeks declined by 7%, illustrating that the program allowed women to seek abortion services earlier.\textsuperscript{viii}

Moreover, 94% of telemedicine patients in the study reported being very satisfied compared to 88% of face-to-face patients. Ninety percent of telemedicine patients said they would recommend the service to a friend, in comparison to 83% of face-to-face patients.\textsuperscript{ix}

These are important findings, given that some politicians have gone out of their way to restrict abortion access despite the fact that the majority of Americans support safe, legal abortion.\textsuperscript{x} With the recent increase in targeted regulation of abortion provider (TRAP) laws and subsequent clinic closures, the potential for telemedicine to increase access to abortion is more necessary than ever. Texas, for example, will go from having 44 abortion clinics in 2011 to 6 by September 2014.\textsuperscript{x} While this politically-driven trend is outrageous, telemedicine could nevertheless play a major role in helping to fill this increasing gap in the health care system.

Access to Maternal Health Care

The Antenatal Neonatal Guidelines, Education, and Learning System (ANGELS) network, based at the University of Arkansas, is an example of telemedicine being used to improve maternal health outcomes. The ANGELS network connects health practitioners and patients with neonatal, maternal, and fetal specialists they may not otherwise be able to consult.\textsuperscript{xii} Women with high-risk pregnancies were able to receive a variety of services, including virtual real-time medical consultations with specialists and follow-up care. As a result of this program, more women accessed medical consultations, more low birth weight babies were born in hospitals where they could receive necessary care, and women experienced fewer complications. In addition, the 60-day infant mortality rate was reduced by 0.5%.\textsuperscript{xiii} The ANGELS network exemplifies how telemedicine can improve health outcomes for women and their babies by expanding access to necessary care.

Conclusion

Despite the potential of telemedicine to improve reproductive health outcomes, some politicians are trying to ban its use, especially in the delivery of medication abortion care. Such bans are simply one more way that some politicians try to limit a woman’s ability to access safe and legal abortion. These attempts at limiting telemedicine are frustrating because, according to the data, telemedicine is safe and acceptable to patients. Indeed, the Iowa Planned Parenthood study indicates that some patients might prefer to access care in this way.\textsuperscript{xiv} Telemedicine can and should be utilized to fill gaps in reproductive health care and we should fight any efforts to restrict rather than expand its use.


