The Way Forward for Telemedicine

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A lot of us have argued that one of the floodgates for telemedicine has been reimbursement. If states and the Federal government more liberally reimbursed or required reimbursement for telemedicine service, we argue then a significant barrier to broader telemedicine will be removed. This is a valid argument, and the potential flurry of activity on Capitol Hill as of this writing (September 20, 2017) gives many hope that Medicare reimbursement for telemedicine may be greatly expanded soon.

Alas, another problem persists. A spate of recent surveys and reports on utilization demonstrate that awareness should be viewed as a similar sort of barrier. It is, of course, a generalization to say this, but consumers are largely unaware of the benefit being made available to them, or are unaware of the appropriate uses of a telemedicine service. It would be foolish to speculate as to the reasons why, but a recent trend may help to erode this barrier.

When it comes to customer service and user engagement, none are better than our technology industry. The West Coast tech giants clearly understand how to engage and attract users. The remarkable success of smartphones provides ample evidence—can you think of any other consumer product of comparably high-cost being as ubiquitous? It is also clear that the health care industry has failed to engage consumers as effectively. There are likely multiple reasons for this. Health care is: (1) highly regulated, resulting in limited ability to be quickly responsive to consumer demands; (2) run by professionals trained in many things, but not sales or consumer satisfaction and engagement; and (3) burdened both by a lack of competition at the point of sale, and by a third-party payment system that has so far proven to be impervious to the forces of disintermediation.

I am certain other causes could be identified as well.

The evolution of telemedicine services may be bridging these two industries. In the process, it may succeed in removing a barrier to more wide-spread adoption. Telemedicine services are increasingly being offered through technologies designed closer to those offered by consumer technology companies. Simpler interfaces, greater functionality and portability are making access much less of an issue for consumers. Combined with positive experience, the “appification” of health care could be upon us in the form of more user-friendly telemedicine services.

Of course, a lot must happen for this evolution to continue, let alone succeed. However, blending the strengths of these two industries could be the path of success for telemedicine.

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