

Population Health NEWS

Antimicrobial Stewardship Programs Serve as Best Defense Against Growing Public Health Issue

by Paul T. Green, Pharm.D., MHA, BCPS

The growth of antibiotic-resistant pathogens is a major public health and patient safety concern, recently classified by the World Health Organization as "one of the biggest threats to global health."¹ While the threat is not new, less than half of U.S. healthcare systems have fully implemented an antimicrobial stewardship program (ASP),² which represents among the most effective means to combat this growing problem.

Assessing the Challenge

More than half of all patients admitted to a U.S. hospital receive an antibiotic as part of their treatment, and up to 50% of these prescriptions are not needed or are not optimally effective as prescribed.³ This overuse is considered to be the single most important factor leading to antibiotic resistance around the world.⁴

Nationally, more than two million people annually are infected with bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics, resulting in approximately 23,000 deaths and \$23 billion in excess healthcare costs each year.⁵ Despite these alarming numbers and the increased awareness over the last few years, the current model in place to address the issue across the healthcare system is still relatively sporadic, especially as it relates to tracking and sharing antimicrobial utilization and resistance data.

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Lack of Access to Specialty Care, Eminent Shortage Disrupts Healthcare Industry

by Brooke LeVasseur

As demographics change and evolve, so do the medical needs of Americans. The United States is currently facing a large aging population, many of whose members have complex medical needs. As a result, the demand for specialty care in the United States is at an all-time high.

Getting timely access to care, however, is often an intricate and convoluted process that can be frustrating for patients seeking medical attention. Many patients encounter long wait lists or must travel far to obtain needed specialty care. Compounding this problem is a growing physician shortage: The United States is projected to experience a deficit of 95,000 physicians by 2025.¹

The demand for physicians is continuing to increase; however, the supply of medical professionals is not keeping up with this growth. Specialties, such as surgery, emergency medicine, anesthesiology, radiology, psychiatry and many other high-demand clinical disciplines will experience significant shortages by 2030.²

The main factors contributing to the projected shortage of specialty care physicians are continual population growth and the steady increase in life expectancy of Americans. By 2030, 20% of the U.S. population will be comprised of people over 65 years of age, resulting in an increased need for specialized medical attention.³

Fortunately for patients, it is not only demographics that are changing and evolving. Technology is revolutionizing numerous industrial sectors, and the medical field is beginning to embrace these technological advancements.

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Telehealth incorporates a broad variety of services, from consultation and patient monitoring to exchanging medical records electronically to help gain a better understanding of a patient's medical history. Telemedicine, including eConsults, is transforming our healthcare system in these six distinct ways:

1. **Increased access to specialty care.** New technology now allows for specialists to collaborate with primary care physicians (PCPs) in order to remotely diagnose and monitor health conditions of patients. With eConsults, PCPs have access to specialists with whom they can share all relevant patient data and receive care plan recommendations in a matter of hours. Electronic collaboration between providers could deliver more timely access to quality care, often while avoiding the need for patients to see a specialist in person. This system allows for patients in remote locations to easily access medical services. For patients that are unable to locate an in-network specialist to receive the care they require, telemedicine allows for consultations with doctors outside of their network without added out-of-pocket cost.
2. **Reduced cost of care.** Earlier access to specialty care via eConsults reduces expensive specialist visits and patient costs related to travel and copayments. Incorporating eConsults into a primary care practice ensures that patients in need of specialist input are matched with the most appropriate modality of care for the right patient at the right time, decreasing overall healthcare expenses. Telehealth could reduce healthcare costs by enabling at-home monitoring that can eliminate the need for expensive hospital visits. It also removes the need for costly patient transfers in the case of certain emergencies.
3. **Improved health outcomes.** eConsults are a valuable tool to better triage referrals by matching patient acuity level to the most appropriate modality of care. Patients with lower acuity needs could be safely treated by their PCP with the input of a specialist, freeing up in-person appointment slots for those who most need face-to-face care. Utilization of eConsults has been shown to significantly impact patient outcomes, reducing emergency department (ED) visits and hospitalizations by providing earlier treatment. Patients that receive earlier treatment not only have an increased chance of receiving a positive health outcome, but earlier treatment also helps reduce potential costs.
4. **Telehealth helps foster better support for patients and their families.** Patients who are able to receive care in the comfort of their homes or at a local primary care site enables them to maintain closer contact with family and friends, while also allowing them to play a more active role in their own medical care. For at-home caregivers, telehealth also gives home caregivers the ability to receive guidance from medical professionals electronically and consult with physicians about proper care, new symptoms and treatments, providing an overall better quality of life for their loved ones.

If families live a significant distance from patients, they are able to speak with doctors and even attend appointments by phone or video via telehealth. This helps to avoid the cost and time associated with travel, while eliminating the need for doctors to have to do multiple in-person meetings.

5. **Telehealth helps with medical education programs.** It gives physicians access to continuing education and allows for an easier and more direct dialogue with outside clinics to better share educational information. This provides an opportunity for doctors to continually expand their education and learn new ways to better care for patients. It also enables physicians and medical students in remote locations to learn about different specialties.

Expanding medical education provides opportunities to not only increase the number of physicians, but also to create well-rounded professionals that have access to learning from specialists all over the world. It is this dialogue that offers opportunities for innovation and creates a climate for discovering cutting edge medical advancements.

6. **Telehealth increases productivity.** If consultations are conducted electronically, employees could avoid leaving work to see patients. Home monitoring of chronic diseases has the capability to reduce hospital visits and allow more time for physicians to treat patients. The national average for having to return to a hospital within 30 days following heart failure is 20%.⁴ Utilizing telehealth for patient monitoring has reduced this statistic to less than 4%.⁵ This decline in patient return shows how incorporating at-home care monitoring allows physicians to take better care of their patients and maximize productivity. Telemedicine and eConsults insure that wait lists for specialty doctors are not overcrowded with patients who do not need to be there, allowing for doctors to offer treatment to those patients who require their attention.

Faced with a growing shortage of healthcare providers and a rapidly aging baby boomer generation, stakeholders across the ecosystem must be focused on finding solutions to address the serious issue of timely access to care. Technology is quickly revolutionizing many industries and is beginning to make notable differences in patient access to medical professionals. Through the use of telehealth services, providers are able to deliver quality care at a lower cost, while also providing convenience and improving efficiency.

¹"The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand: Projections from 2013 to 2025." Association of American Medical Colleges. 2015.

²"The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand 2017 Update: Projections from 2015 to 2030." *IHS Markit*. 2017.

³"An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States." United States Census Bureau. 2014.

⁴Hernandez AF, Greiner MA, Fonarow GC, et al. "Relationship Between Early Physician Follow-up and 30-day Readmission Among Medicare Beneficiaries Hospitalized for Heart Failure." *JAMA*. 2010.

⁵"Using Telehealth to Reduce All-Cause 30-Day Hospital Readmissions Among Heart Failure Patients Receiving Skilled Home Health Services." *Applied Clinical Informatics*. 2016

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