

TELEHEALTH AND CONNECTED HEALTH **NOW**

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TRANSITIONING TO TELEHEALTH:

Essential Considerations to Digitizing Healthcare

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TRANSITIONING TO TELEHEALTH: ESSENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS TO DIGITIZING HEALTHCARE



MICHELLE CONGER

Chief strategy officer for OSF HealthCare and chief executive officer for OSF Saint Gabriel Digital Health

The pandemic has forced healthcare systems and physician's practices to innovate and try new approaches to care delivery, resulting in the explosive growth of telehealth services. But a comprehensive digital solution can involve much more than the video encounters people typically associate with virtual care.

As the countdown to COVID-19 began in the state of Illinois, OSF HealthCare developed a wide-ranging approach that coupled digital assets with human elements. The 14-hospital integrated health system based in Peoria, Illinois, and operated by The Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis, has a strong commitment to innovation, said Michelle Conger, chief strategy officer for OSF HealthCare and chief executive officer for OSF Saint Gabriel Digital Health. During the HealthLeaders Telehealth and Connected Health Now online summit, Conger shared a mini-case study of the organization's initiatives that provide a glimpse "into the way healthcare will be delivered in the future."

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—Michelle Conger, chief strategy officer for OSF HealthCare and chief executive officer for OSF Saint Gabriel Digital Health

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- **AI Chatbot:** In December, more than two months before the first coronavirus case was identified in Illinois, OSF launched Clare, an AI virtual assistance chatbot, designed to triage and help individuals navigate through the OSF HealthCare system. Patients access the chatbot from a phone or through the home page of the organization's website.
- **Nurse Triage:** While technology played a key role in OSF's COVID response, leaders knew from the outset that connecting to a live person would be an essential component of the plan. Within 48 hours of making that decision, the organization launched a nurse triage hotline, OSF Knows. Nurses help patients determine whether their symptoms require greater scrutiny and connect individuals requiring further care to advanced practitioners for a virtual visit. During a 31-day period from March 13 through April 21, nurses handled 18,627 calls.
- **Texting:** Another essential component of OSF's digital approach to the pandemic is a free text messaging tool known as COVID Companion. Designed as another approach to educate and triage people who are concerned about the virus, Conger said the messaging solution asks basic questions, then provides tailored information in accordance with recommendations from the CDC and the Departments of Public Health in Illinois and Michigan. Subscribers receive daily texts with educational tips for preventing or addressing COVID-19, as well as ways to connect with public health resources in their local area.
- **Digital Health Workers Delivering Care at Home:** A partnership between the state of Illinois, OSF HealthCare, and other healthcare organizations helps keep COVID patients at home. The Pandemic Health Worker Program delivers toolkits to patients' homes, which include a computer tablet preloaded with COVID-related data and an app that connects patients to their health worker, a thermometer, hand sanitizer, and a COVID booklet. Twice daily for 16 days, workers conduct digital check-ins via video, chat, or phone to monitor each patient's progress.
- **Lessons for Other Healthcare Systems:** "The most important lesson we learned is to build an end-to-end digital solution that was directly connected to our traditional health system," said Conger. "We've always had the vision that we wanted to meet patients where they were, and had had a large investment in home care, innovation, and other types of tools, but what we've been able to do is create this kind of capability at scale. We now have the platform and skill set to take us into the future."



CLINTON PHILLIPS
Founder and CEO of Medici,
Austin, Texas



SCOTT JENSEN, MD
Medical Director
Jensen Family Medicine

6 FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A TELEHEALTH SOLUTION

With the sudden popularity of telehealth, physicians are discovering that connecting with patients virtually is much more complex than conducting a simple video chat with family members. Issues related to privacy, workflow, technology, and integration with electronic health records (EHR) and billing systems can present unanticipated challenges.

During the HealthLeaders Telehealth and Connected Health Now online summit, Scott Jensen, MD, medical director of Jensen Family Medicine, shared lessons from the practice's journey into telehealth and factors to consider when deciding what solution will work best. He was joined by Clinton Phillips, founder and CEO of Austin, Texas–based Medici, which offers a telehealth app for physicians and which Dr. Jensen has been using with his patients for the last two years.

1. Keep HIPAA compliance and security paramount. In response to the pandemic, the government loosened restrictions that formerly prevented providers from communicating via non-HIPAA-compliant consumer video chat apps, said Jensen. Providers quickly discovered problems with using these apps, including hackers and cyberattacks. “Many of these tools are not safe,” said Phillips. “There has been a relaxation in regulation, but there has not been a relaxation in risk.” And, after the public health emergency declaration ends and the government waivers are no longer in effect, physicians will once again be required to use HIPAA-compliant tools. Solutions offering end-to-end encryption and SOC 2 certification are the most secure, said Phillips.

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2. Combine secure texting with video visit capabilities. Older patients aren't always comfortable with video visits, may have challenges using devices, or may not even own the appropriate technology, said Jensen. Challenges downloading or operating apps can lead to no-shows, he said. In addition, while telehealth offers a new way to connect with patients, replacing a 15-minute face-to-face visit with a 15-minute video visit doesn't increase provider efficiencies, he noted. Secure texting, offered in tandem with video capabilities, helps bridge the digital divide and offers opportunities for practices to enhance efficiencies and drive increased patient engagement, said Phillips.
3. Consider workflow. Beyond the actual patient encounter, office setting workflows include check-in and check-out, scheduling, checking insurance, issuing prescriptions, and generating referrals to other physicians. Many telehealth solutions don't include these options in their workflows, cautioned Jensen. "Providers almost have to reimagine their practice just to be able to do telemedicine," said Phillips. He suggested seeking a solution with a command center built into the app that will enable "providers to feel like they have some control and can still leverage the workflow that they know works for them."
4. Ensure billing options can be incorporated into the solution. "In a bricks-and-mortar practice, it's challenging enough to collect copays and to find out what patients' insurance covers and what they owe at the time of care," said Jensen. "Telemedicine creates yet another complication in that flow." A telehealth solution that offers features to capture payment information during the interaction is ideal, said Phillips. He suggested exploring options that offer the ability to collect cash, charge an HSA or debit/credit card, or integrate with a practice's billing system or EHR.
5. Explore telehealth companies' financial stability and investment in future capabilities. With explosive growth in the telehealth technology sector, it's wise to explore the financial stability of companies you are considering using, said Phillips. In addition, he said, ask how companies plan to expand their product offerings to keep pace with evolving technology. Medici is developing an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered tool that will use asynchronous communications to ask patients a series of questions before their physician encounter, he said. The tool will use AI-driven algorithms to build on a patient's response to each question and present a differential diagnosis to the physician for consideration during the actual patient encounter.
6. Consider the value of other features built into a company's product. Medici offers additional features such as translation into 40 languages for text messages and \$1 million in malpractice insurance coverage to its customers, said Phillips.

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