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## Reader Survey Offers Insights into Telehealth

04/23/19 / Nancy Grover ([news\\_author.php?author\\_id=](#))

Telehealth and telemedicine hold great promise for the workers' compensation industry, according to advocates. But are stakeholders using it? And if so, in what ways?

Those are questions we've asked in an online poll on [WorkersCompensation.com](#) over the last few weeks. While we did not get a tremendous response, the answers, along with insights from several industry thought leaders, offer a glimpse of telehealth/telemedicine in the workers' compensation system.

### The Poll

In response to the question, *Are you currently using telehealth services for workers' compensation claims?* Only 32.6 percent said 'yes.'

Among those who said they are, many said they use it for 'nurse triage.' Other answers included:

- Follow up care
- Access to care in rural areas
- Maintaining frequent contact with recovering workers where regular face-to-face meetings are impractical (particularly in remote home locations)
- Physical therapy & behavioral health

Respondents also said that 'diagnostics,' and 'integration of multiple providers' were good uses for telehealth, although they themselves were not necessarily using it in that way.

### Some Confusion

Using technology to allow injured workers to remotely access various providers is clearly catching on in the workers' compensation system. However, a possible barrier preventing even more from doing so could be confusion – over how it is used, privacy issues, logistics, and even the terminology.

For example, the terms telehealth and telemedicine may not necessarily refer to the same thing, depending on the organization. In general, telehealth is the overall term and may include things such as health education and information.

"In telemedicine you're having a clinical encounter," said Ann Schnure, VP of Telemedicine Operations for Concentra. "In other words, you could get billed for it."

Concentra uses telemedicine for occupational injury care. "We see initial injuries and rechecks," Schnure said. "It's virtual care."

Therefore, nurse triage, would not be considered 'telemedicine' at Concentra, unless there was video involved and the nurse was doing a virtual exam of the injury. Whether it is considered telehealth or telemedicine, some organizations use nurse triage as a potential springboard to virtual treatment.

"In our world what it means is, we only give our claims access to telehealth if [the injured worker] has gone through their 24-hour nurse triage first," said Teresa Bartlett, M.D., Senior Medical Officer at Sedgwick, "because there's no other way for us to vet whether the case is a good candidate for it."

Not every case is appropriate for telemedicine. An injured worker who requires stitches or has a severe injury for example, would need to be treated in person. But those with minor injuries are given the option to be treated through telemedicine.

"We tell them, 'this is a situation where you could see a physician right now or at your convenience through telehealth,'" Bartlett said. "If they hesitate, we allow them to go to a facility. So it's more about their comfort level in connecting that way."

Bartlett said some injured workers are reluctant to use the virtual option because they may not fully understand it.

Part of the confusion over telehealth and telemedicine stems from the differences in state laws regarding the issue. While most jurisdictions have adopted some regulations, others have a way to go.

"Washington is the most restrictive state; you really can't do it there, basically, due to many issues," Schnure said. "In their regulations, it ... requires a hands-on physical exam."

She said Washington adopted its telehealth regulations in 2012 and didn't realize how restrictive they are. "An advisory board is meeting on it."

Another issue adding to the confusion is the way telehealth was initially introduced into the market several years ago.

"The first people who came out with it wanted all sorts of fees and contracts. They didn't understand the workers' compensation environment," Schnure said. "That's all gone away,"

Nevertheless, Schnure said she still spends time explaining that there are no contracts or an implementation fee. She finds some people think it will be much more complicated to adopt than it really is, although that is changing.

“Once [people] try it or realize there is an option, there’s an ‘aha’ moment,” Schnure said. “That’s where we are. People really like the convenience and that will just grow.”

#### **Other uses**

Telemedicine used for behavioral health issues is another growing area in workers’ compensation, along with tele-rehab. Sedgwick, for example, has found virtual physical therapy can be a good alternative to treatment at a facility, where the injured worker may be one of many people being treated by a single therapist.

“MedRisk will reach out and do a one-on-one 30-minute session with a person,” Bartlett said. “There’s great feedback on that from those [injured workers] who accept the invitation to connect. They really understand how they should be doing their exercises.”

Proponents of telehealth/telemedicine say the workers’ compensation system is in its infancy in terms of the many ways it can be used to generate better outcomes.

“In the future, telepresence will be a way we can connect – doctors, injured workers, nurses, examiners – everybody that needs to know something about a claim. I think it will take off,” Bartlett said. “I don’t think we’re there yet.”