American Academy of Neurology Telehealth Position Statement

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Abstract:

Telehealth services complement in-person neurologic care. The American Academy of Neurology (AAN) supports patient access to telehealth services regardless of location; coverage for telehealth services by all subscriber benefits and insurance; equitable provider reimbursement; simplified state licensing requirements easing access to virtual care; and expanding telehealth research and quality initiatives. The roles and responsibilities of providers should be clearly delineated in telehealth service models.

Introduction

The American Academy of Neurology (AAN) is the world’s largest neurology specialty society, representing more than 36,000 neurologists and clinical neuroscience professionals. The AAN is dedicated to promoting the highest quality patient-centered neurologic care. This update to the 2014 AAN position statement on telemedicine reflects recent advances in telehealth practice and research and changes in related regulations, policies, and legislation. The AAN advocates for policies that ease unnecessary restrictions to virtual care, offers guidance about the clinical practice of telehealth, and identifies important gaps in the telehealth knowledge base. To ensure delivery of safe high quality virtual care stakeholders, including providers (defined in this paper as neurologists and other qualified health care professionals who provide neurologic services), regulators, policymakers, and payers, need to consider access; standards; reimbursement; practicing across state borders; professional liability; and coordination of patient care with local providers.
**Definition of Telehealth**

Telehealth, also known as virtual care, uses digital information and telecommunication technologies to provide health care when participants are separated by distance or time. Participants include physicians, other qualified health care professionals, and additional members of the health care team connected virtually with patients, family members, and other care providers. Telehealth facilitates the exchange and interpretation of text, data, images, audio, or video, with synchronous (e.g., provider and patient available at the same time) or asynchronous communication. Examples of telehealth services include real-time two-way interactive audio-video conferencing, mobile health applications, store and forward evaluation and management services, virtual check-ins, electronic interprofessional consultations, telephone services, and remote patient monitoring. The choice of telehealth modality for a specific virtual encounter is determined by the needs of the patient, their ability to access and use the necessary technology, the legal and regulatory landscapes, and the available supporting evidence.

**Benefits of Telehealth**

Telehealth can benefit patients and providers. Examples include:

- Improved access to expert neurological evaluation\(^5\)
- Enhanced comfort, convenience, and safety, particularly for patients with limited mobility due to their medical condition\(^6\) or need for home medical support equipment\(^7\)
- Reduced travel time and associated costs\(^5\)
• Decreased time away from work or other essential activities for patients and care partners\textsuperscript{8}
• Reduced caregiver stress\textsuperscript{9}
• Increased care partner and provider participation during a visit\textsuperscript{9}
• Better assessment of social determinants of health, including the patient’s home environment\textsuperscript{10}
• Early intervention prior to a scheduled office visit, based on continuous assessment of neurological disease progression and treatment efficacy\textsuperscript{11}
• Protection of patient and providers from infectious disease exposure and reducing use of personal protective equipment\textsuperscript{4}

Evidence supports the effectiveness of telehealth in inpatient and outpatient settings, for acute evaluation and routine assessment\textsuperscript{5,12} and for multiple neurologic subspecialties.\textsuperscript{5,13} During the early part of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, neurology practices had one of the highest uptake rates for ambulatory telemedicine (47.9\% of total visits) and a smaller decline in total visits when compared with other specialties.\textsuperscript{14} In acute emergency department or inpatient hospital settings patients may be assessed and rapidly triaged to determine whether they would be best served at their current location or transferred to another facility. This benefits patients by allowing them to remain in their communities when possible and expedites access to advanced services when appropriate, thus optimizing resource utilization.

Video visits have proven to be cost-effective.\textsuperscript{15,16} However, they do not necessarily reduce the practice expenses incurred in delivering care compared to in-person visits because of needs for technical infrastructure and support, security and privacy measures, patient education and
logistics, and a potentially wide range of central and remote office and hospital network collaborations between essentially every node of patient care. A thorough analysis of the practice expense must be a focus of investigation.

Potential Solutions for Barriers to Telehealth

Access

Patients should have access to high-quality telehealth services in the United States and its territories and when traveling abroad. Initially, telehealth programs were focused on patients living in rural settings with no access to specialized ambulatory and inpatient healthcare services. However, many other patients also have barriers to healthcare access including those: 1) who live in nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities; 2) with conditions that make travel excessively burdensome; 3) who are unable to drive; 4) who live in remote military settings; 5) who live in densely populated urban areas where traveling even short distances can be time-consuming or expensive; 6) whose safety would be compromised by in-person visits (e.g. at risk for infection or with a need for home medical support equipment); and 7) who seek to improve continuity of care when they are traveling (including those who may spend several months of the year at another residence).

Telehealth should be an option for both new-to-practice and established ambulatory patients provided they are appropriately triaged to the visit type that meets their unique needs. In addition, care gaps affecting patients admitted to hospitals with no neurological consultation coverage could be addressed by expanding inpatient teleneurology services.

One potential benefit of expanding telehealth as a national model of health care is improving convenience and democratizing access to expert subspecialists throughout the nation. However, the
unintended consequence could be negatively impacting the sustainability of local practices that currently offer the benefits of in-person and long-term continuity of care. Furthermore, without the provider understanding community social and medical resources and local rules (such as driving restriction rules), the remotely-practicing provider may be delivering care with significant gaps. Further investigation is required to address this paradox.

The AAN encourages actions to minimize the digital divide by supporting affordable nationwide high-speed internet access to limit disenfranchisement of those with inadequate or unaffordable network connectivity and efforts to promote digital literacy and alleviate other technology or device limitations. Because some patients have barriers related to language and visual or hearing impairments, resources to assist with translator services and appropriate, easily-accessed adaptive technology must be available and reimbursed at equitable rates. Telephone-only visits should be available for encounters that require real time two-way interaction but in which an audio-video encounter may not be necessary, e.g., medication reconciliation, some counselling situations, discussion of treatment side effects, or when patients do not have or cannot use more advanced telehealth modalities.

**Reimbursement and Payment Parity**

The complexity of various coverage policies, service and procedure codes, reimbursement rates, and documentation standards across Medicare, Medicaid, and numerous private payers creates important barriers to providers trying to incorporate telehealth services into their practices. The definition of “parity” varies by state and insurer. Moreover, the cost borne by the patient is difficult to determine in advance of the provision of services. Reform should be based on the following principles:
• Patient financial responsibility (e.g., fees and copays) for telehealth encounters should not exceed comparable in-person expenses.

• Coverage and the professional component of reimbursement for two-way real time interactive encounters should be independent of setting (in-person, audio-video, telephone), provided that standards of care for the encounters are met since the provider’s cognitive work is equivalent.

• The practice expense of providing a two-way real time interactive telehealth service may be different from that of providing an in-person service and should be determined by evidence- and resource-based methodologies.

• Professional and practice expense reimbursement for providing other telehealth modalities such as store-and-forward digital evaluation and management services, interprofessional consultations, and remote physiologic monitoring should be evidence- and resource-based.

• To best address the needs of the patient and their health, the appropriateness of a telehealth evaluation should be determined on a case-by-case basis by the provider and the patient, not by the payer.

• When traveling out of state, patients should have coverage for telehealth access to their home state providers.

• If there are no local providers practicing a certain specialty, patients should have telehealth access covered for that specialty.

• Policies should support and encourage the development of telehealth care models in addition to audio-video encounters that can potentially improve patient outcomes and
reduce costs. Examples may include remote monitoring and asynchronous evaluation and management services.

- In addition to fee-for-service reimbursement models, value-based telehealth models should be developed to optimize healthcare resource utilization at multiple levels: insurance, practice, patient, and society.

**Telehealth Practice Across State Borders**

Each state defines and regulates the practice of medicine, including telehealth, within its boundaries. State regulations dictate what constitutes a physician-patient relationship, what services are permissible once a relationship is established, if and what medications can be prescribed, scope of practice, and malpractice policies.\(^\text{17}\) These variations pose significant barriers to the practice of telehealth across state borders. Licensing, prescribing, and related policies should be simplified. A desirable solution could include blanket reciprocity and an expedited licensing process that would require one unrestricted state license, a new background check for each state in which telemedicine is practiced and reduced annual fees for limited practices. This would ensure protection of patients’ rights to receive telehealth services as they require. The Interstate Medical Licensure Compact (IMLC), an agreement among 29 participating U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and Territory of Guam to streamline the state licensing process for physicians who qualify, maintains the state’s authority to regulate the practice of medicine within its borders. While the IMLC simplifies the application process, it does not standardize practice requirements.
Medical liability for telehealth services varies from carrier to carrier. Unless this changes, neurologists must understand individual carrier policies to ensure that telehealth encounters are covered by their policy and apply to the states in which their patients are located.

**Hospital Credentialing**

Hospital credentialing requirements and procedures vary between hospitals. This complex process can delay patient access to needed care. Simplification of hospital credentialing requirements and widespread utilization of certified credentials verification organizations would improve patient access to inpatient teleneurology services.

**Streamlining Other Telehealth Processes**

Currently there is considerable variability across payers, sites of service, and health care organizations regarding the need and type of consent required prior to a telehealth encounter, requirements for billing compliance, and the necessity for an in-person encounter prior to a virtual encounter. Barriers to practicing telehealth would be decreased if these processes were simplified or standardized.

**Delineation of Roles and Responsibilities**

To prevent confusion and maximize quality and safety of the telehealth care provided, the roles and responsibilities of participating facilities, clinicians (including, but not limited to, physicians, advanced practice providers, nurses, trainees), and hospital and practice staff should be clearly delineated. In view of the limitations of telehealth (e.g., requiring nuanced or detailed neuromuscular, ophthalmologic, and vestibular examinations), the medical community should practice responsible behavior regarding appropriate remote evaluation in instances where the lack of an in-person examination may compromise medical decision making. It is also helpful to
clarify the expected nature and duration of the therapeutic relationship, including the 
relationship between a consultant seen via telehealth for a second opinion relative to the 
patient’s usual care team and expected follow up if the provider is prescribing medications or 
suggesting diagnostic testing.

In instances in which telehealth services are provided to a remote clinic or hospital, the AAN 
agrees with the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) that “the best patient care 
occurs when there is no ambiguity as to which provider is responsible for care of a patient.”\textsuperscript{18} 
Agreements between local and remote sites need strict clarification of respective roles prior to 
initiating patient care. This includes, but is not limited to, the scheduled availability of the 
telehealth provider; who is responsible for placing orders, following up test results, and 
assessing the patient after consultation; billing responsibilities; and IT support.

\textbf{Limitations of Telehealth Services}

\textit{Adequacy of Telehealth Evaluations}

As telehealth becomes more commonplace, including telehealth encounters with patients in 
their homes, it is important that patients and consumers understand the benefits, limitations, 
and their rights regarding these services. The ability to effectively triage new patients and 
concerns via telehealth has not been well-studied. Although telehealth can be used to evaluate 
new patients or new symptoms, it may be difficult to determine whether the appropriate 
assessment and medical decision making can be adequately performed via telehealth. Patients 
and referring health care providers should be informed of the possibility that patients may still 
need to seek in-person care if their concerns cannot be safely addressed via telehealth.

Additionally, a provider may lack knowledge about, and availability of, social and medical
resources near the patient. National initiatives to educate patients and provide standard language regarding the use of telehealth can help inform and protect patients and providers.

**Cost**

The initial economic investment to establish a telehealth practice may be a limitation for some practices and is based on the settings where telehealth will be provided; the proportion of the practice consisting of telehealth; necessary staff to help with setting up, scheduling, triaging, and greeting the patient during the telehealth visit prior to the provider connecting to the visit; coding; and billing. Additional expenses potentially include the cost of the platform used and hardware such as computers, tablets, carts, or accessories such as microphones and cameras at the provider and patient locations. Additionally, the need for IT support and new staff or training of existing staff are all factors to be considered.

**Fraud**

While telehealth modalities can provide substantial benefits to patients, these care models are potentially as vulnerable to the same fraudulent practices that may occur with in-person evaluations. Payers are concerned the cost of care could increase if patients are asked to follow up more often than necessary or that visits could be fabricated or billed at levels higher than warranted. Providers fear that these concerns may prompt regulators to inappropriately limit telehealth access or lead to a disproportionate cost-of-compliance for providers offering telehealth services. Data on billing behavior can help determine whether fraud or abuse has occurred, and the digital footprint of visits is traceable thus reducing the risk of fabricated visits. We believe that the programs in place to monitor in-person activities will be adequate to monitor for telehealth fraud.
Cybersecurity

Telehealth expansion raises concerns for cybersecurity and risk of access to private patient information, malware infections, ransomware attacks, and system breaches. While not specific to telehealth, they must be considered and addressed given increased risk of compromise for practices that do not appropriately protect their systems.

Research Gaps

To expand the evidence base of telehealth, further research is needed spanning the spectrum of virtual healthcare delivery models including maximizing the value and quality of the encounter and minimizing the cost. Conversely, modifications to coverage, licensing, and liability policies will necessitate understanding the impact of these changes on access to telehealth care and on clinical practices, including community physicians.

Given the known marked racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in access to neurological care and outcomes, we must better understand and address technological literacy and the digital divide as well as patient perspectives on quality, trust, privacy concerns if living in crowded living conditions, or in regions with inadequate internet bandwidth.

Optimal examination techniques for direct-to-patient telehealth, limitations of the current virtual neurological examination and methods to work around them, and applications of technology-enhanced examination methods (e.g., biosensors or smartphone-based tasks) require further investigation. Assessment of patient functioning in the home can be enhanced with use of passive and smartphone-based sensors to permit unobtrusive remote patient monitoring and artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to interpret this data. Understanding of the impact of telehealth visits on clinical outcomes, both short-term (e.g., types of concerns best
assessed, diagnostic accuracy, indications for triage to in-person evaluations) and long-term (e.g., neurological disability progression, quality of life), is needed. These clinical outcomes can be weighed against costs from patient, payer, clinical practice, and health system perspectives, and against the impact on care value. Research on optimal methods of graduate and postgraduate training in telehealth care is also needed.

AAN Policy Guidance for Telehealth

The AAN recommends that all stakeholders support the following:

- Advocating for the needs of our patients and members in legislative, regulatory, and payment policies that pertain to telehealth.
- Promotion of telehealth services to improve access to care, patient satisfaction, and safety; enable providers to practice in care models that promote career satisfaction and well-being; and to reduce health care costs.
- Determination of the appropriateness of a telehealth evaluation on a case-by-case basis by the provider and the patient to best protect the interests of the patient, not by payment policy.
- Access to telehealth services for all patients located in any U.S. state or territory, regardless of geographic location of the patient, provider, or payer.
- Support and encouragement of the development of a variety of virtual care models with the potential to improve patient outcomes and reduce costs, including remote monitoring and asynchronous visits.
- Payer coverage for translation and adaptive services for patients who speak a different language or are visually- or hearing-impaired.
• Payment parity for the professional component of two-way interactive real time virtual
  services regardless of the method used (e.g., in-person, video, telephone) provided
  standards of care are met.
• Evidence- and resource-based determination of practice expenses of telehealth services
  which may be different from practice expenses for providing in-person services.
• Resource-based valuation for reimbursement including provider work, practice expense
  and liability insurance expenses for emerging communication-based technology services
  including audio-only encounters, store and forward digital evaluation and management
  services, interprofessional consultations, and remote physiologic monitoring.
• Comparable patient financial responsibility (e.g., fees and copays) for telehealth
  encounters and in-person evaluations.
• Understanding currently applicable state-specific laws regarding the practice of
  telehealth for each location in which patients are seen.
• Simplified state medical licensing, prescribing, hospital credentialling, medical liability
  policies, insurance coverage, and reimbursement schedules for telehealth across state
  borders.
• Unambiguous delineation of where responsibility of the teleneurologist ends and the
  local admitting or consulting physician’s responsibilities begin for each telehealth
  encounter.
• Appropriate remote evaluation in instances in which the lack of an in-person
  examination limits medical decision making.
• Support for further technologic innovations to better enhance patient confidentiality and safety.
• Research and development of virtual care models, including patient triage, which are cost-effective and expediently evaluate and manage patients in any setting remote from their provider.
• Research on the benefits and limitations of telehealth, as well as its impact on health equity, including access to care for socio-economically disadvantaged populations.
• Development of optimal methods for graduate and post-graduate training in telehealth.

Conclusions
The AAN predicts that telehealth will continue to play an essential role in the care of patients with neurologic conditions. We will best serve our patients and our members by advocating for increased access; broader insurance coverage; fair reimbursement; reduced regulatory and legislative barriers; and expanding the telehealth evidence base by promoting research on its proper roles and value in neurologic care and on the costs associated with providing telehealth services.

Position Statement History
Update drafted by Jaime M. Hatcher-Martin, MD, PhD; Neil A. Busis, MD; Bruce H. Cohen, MD; Rebecca A. Wolf, MBA; Elaine C. Jones, MD; Eric R. Anderson, MD, PhD; Joseph V. Fritz, PhD; Steven J. Shook, MD, MBA; Riley M. Bove, MD, MMSc
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Approved by the Practice Management and Technology and Health Policy Subcommittees on November 17, 2020; by the Medical Economics and Practice Committee on November 25, 2020; and by the AAN Institute Board of Directors on December 11, 2020.

Appendix 1: Authors

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References


