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Clinician attitudes towards telehealth may impact how patients receive care

BOSTON – Provider attitudes regarding telehealth quality were associated with utilization rates, according to results published today in JAMA Network Open by researchers at the VA Boston Healthcare System, Harvard Medical School, and Boston University.

Findings suggest that clinician attitudes may play an important role in explaining the wide variation in rates of telehealth use across specialties during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Mental health, primary care and specialty care providers had fairly different perceptions of the quality and ease of use of video and phone care, and those beliefs aligned strongly with actual telehealth utilization rates,” said lead author Dr. Samantha L. Connolly, a clinical psychologist at the VA Boston Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research, and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

The study surveyed 866 mental health, primary care and specialty care clinicians across eight medical centers in the VA New England Healthcare System. Survey items assessed provider perceptions of telehealth quality, and responses were compared with telehealth use rates across specialties.

Results showed that, compared with primary care and specialty care clinicians, mental health providers rated the quality of video care highest and were more likely to prefer video over telephone care when treating patients remotely. Conversely, primary care and specialty care clinicians were more likely to rate telephone care equivalent in quality to video telehealth. They also reported more difficulties using video care, including technical challenges for patients. These ratings aligned with usage; mental health providers conducted significantly more of their visits using video telehealth when compared to primary and specialty care providers.

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Clinician attitudes and telehealth use – 2 of 2

“These findings are important because audio-only phone care may be lower quality than video care,” summarized Connolly. “To increase rates of video telehealth, processes should be as simple and streamlined as possible. We also need better data comparing the quality of in-person, video and phone care to guide clinicians and healthcare systems in deciding how best to serve patients.”

The paper is available on JAMA Network Open at

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2793101>



Dr. Samantha L. Connolly, a clinical psychologist at the VA Boston Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research, and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, demonstrates a telehealth call at her desk with co-author Dr. Christopher J. Miller, who is on the computer screen and also a VA Boston psychologist and assistant professor at Harvard, June 1, 2022, at the VA Boston Jamaica Plain campus. Connolly and Miller’s article on the effects of clinician attitudes towards telehealth was published in JAMA Network Open June 7, 2022. The survey assessed provider perceptions of telehealth quality, and responses were compared with telehealth use rates across specialties. (VA Boston HCS photo by Deirdre Salvas)