

The Silverling to the Pandemic, Better Health? A Quick Blurb on Telehealth.

With Nashville being the epicenter of healthcare, one would think medical care in the state of Tennessee would be top-notch. Wrong. Joined by fellow southern states such as Kentucky, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, Tennessee ranked among the worst in health care by *U.S. News & World Report*.¹ Considering factors such as healthcare access, quality, and public health, Tennessee came in an un-impressive 38th, 31st, and 43rd respectively. On the bright side, despite a dismal quality of health, the state ranked 5th in fiscal stability!²

One “quick” fix to this problem is the adoption of telemedicine, or “the remote diagnosis and treatment of patients by means of telecommunications technology.”³ These current and developing health technologies have proven to be powerful tools that can relieve stress on some of the issues riddling the U.S. healthcare system. These medical technologies are popularized as a lifeline to citizens in rural areas because they ease residents’ access to medical care. This trait is specifically beneficial to a state like Tennessee, where ten rural hospitals have shuttered their doors in the past ten years, despite 22% of the population living in these areas.⁴

More central to this blog’s purpose, telehealth’s distant services can decrease cost and medical access beyond these remote locations to all Tennessee patients. Telehealth innately reduces expenditures for the patient by eliminating any travel burdens and minimizing the time taken away from work. Not needing access to physical office buildings, hospital resources are saved, reducing costs - benefitting patients through lower medical bills. In addition to resources, telehealth increases the number of doctors beyond those geographically located near the patient. This increases the supply of providers, thus spawning a newly competitive market. In doing so, capitalism takes effect, allowing only the best care providers to flourish while also creating pressures for reasonable, competitive rates.

However, this potential for competitive rates has been a significant barrier to bringing telehealth to the forefront. Needing a Tennessee-specific license to practice medicine within the state’s borders, outside health professionals have historically been unable to render care to Tennessee patients, despite being able to connect with the patient by clicking a button. Not wanting competition from the other state’s telemedical networks, Tennessee providers have resisted the solutions to the licensing barriers’.⁵

One silver lining to COVID has been forcing Tennessee Lawmakers’ hands to start taking steps to make telemedicine available to its citizens.⁶ With providers having to social distance and thus implement remote services, Tennessee’s legislature passed a special sessions law that expands

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/health-care>

² <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/news/2018/02/27/tennessee-ranked-26th-best-state-among-worst-health-care-best-fiscal-stability/376748002/>

³ Oxford Dictionary

⁴ <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/health/2019/05/16/tennessee-rural-hospitals-closing-medicaid-expansion-ballad-health/3245179002/>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207146/>

⁶ <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/tennessee-lawmakers-pass-new-telehealth-coverage-law-with-limits>

telehealth coverage, comparable to that provided for in-person services.⁷ Despite not attacking the licensing barriers directly, this legislation is the first step in opening Tennessee's borders to all telehealth services, for without insurance coverage, there could be no care despite having telemedicine available. As the virus progresses and more people begin to favor online care, it will be fascinating to see where the law takes us, potentially affording Tennessee citizens the opportunity to get out of state care, without leaving the comfort of their homes.

--*Xander Aschi*

Tennessee is ranked as one of the worst states for health care quality, access, and public health. Local providers have historically been resistant to the potential solution found in Telehealth, but in response to the pandemic, legislation has begun to force their hand, extending coverage to telemedical appointments.

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⁷ <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/tennessee-lawmakers-pass-new-telehealth-coverage-law-with-limits>