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Medical Center Provides Telehealth Follow-Up Visits With Eye on Future Medicare Coverage

By Nina Youngstrom

While it waits for Medicare to fully embrace telehealth services, University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Medical Center is all over them. UCSF provides more than 50 telehealth visits a day, with patients often seen from home for follow-up care.

“It’s been our belief that long-term, Medicare will see the light and they will pay for follow-up video visits for specialist care” provided to patients in their homes or in geographic areas not approved for Medicare telehealth coverage, says Carol Yarbrough, business operations manager for the Telehealth Resource Center at UCSF Medical Center. Meanwhile, UCSF provides telehealth visits whether or not it receives Medicare reimbursement.

She has reason to be optimistic about Medicare and telehealth: CMS added telehealth coverage in the proposed 2019 Medicare Physician Fee Schedule (MPFS) regulation, including patient virtual check-ins with physicians, and Congress made its own moves in the 2018 Bipartisan Budget Act. That means in some cases patients could be at home instead of at an “originating site” (e.g., hospital, physician practice), which is normally required to trigger Medicare payment for telehealth services. “It’s the most open I have seen CMS be to telemedicine,” says attorney Thomas Ferrante, with Foley & Lardner LLP in Tampa, Florida. “Now that Medicare is starting to reimburse it, compliance and legal counsel will have to watch these programs,” he notes.

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