Implementing a Pediatric Teledentistry Program

Organization:
Finger Lakes Community Health

Summary:
Finger Lakes Community Health (FLCH) in New York has established a successful teledentistry program. FLCH does not have pediatric dentists on staff. Additionally, they do not offer any types of sedation for dental services. Prior to the teledental program, FLCH would refer their pediatric patients with health concerns, anxiety, or large amounts of dental disease to the Eastman Institute of Oral Health in Rochester, New York. The Eastman Institute has a pediatric dental program with sedation and access to the operating room (OR). At that time, a paper referral was given to the parent who would then schedule a consultation visit at the Eastman Institute. FLCH providers often found that the parent would not schedule an appointment at the Eastman Institute and return to FLCH with worsened oral health conditions a few months later. The Eastman Institute is located 1 to 2 hours away from FLCH dental sites which proved to be a difficult barrier for parents.Typically, the patient would travel to the Eastman Institute to get a consultation with the pediatric dentist, then have to return another day for the treatment. Additionally, many of the parents and children had language barriers which made it challenging to call and schedule appointments. FLCH patients also experienced a 6 to 8-month waitlist to get treatment at the Eastman Institute.

In 2008, FLCH staff observed the Eastman Institute at a local YMCA. The staff from Eastman Institute were conducting screenings by taking pictures of the teeth and sending the encrypted images to the pediatric dentist at the Eastman Institute for evaluation. FLCH dental staff then developed the idea of real time consultations and created a teledentistry program for the pediatric patients who needed care at the Eastman Institute. FLCH had a telehealth program for medical and behavioral health, so the staff was familiar with the equipment needs for this program. FLCH utilized grant funding to purchase the teledentistry equipment including intraoral cameras, webcams, and monitors for each dental operatory at each site.

After 6 months of trial and planning, FLCH began doing pediatric dental consultations with the Eastman Institute. During the appointment, the pediatric dentist at the Eastman Institute will connect to the FLCH dental operatory and appear on the monitor. The FLCH dental provider then introduces the child patient and the parent to the pediatric dentist. Then, the pediatric dentist will run through the patient’s health history and findings from the FLCH dental provider. The FLCH dental provider then utilizes the intraoral camera to go through the patient’s mouth while the pediatric dentist views on their monitor offsite at the Eastman Institute. The pediatric dentist is able to evaluate the patient and provide information for the OR visit at Eastman Institute. The teledentistry visit eliminates the in-person consultation visit at the Eastman Institute and allows the first visit at Eastman Institute to be for treatment.
FLCH care coordinators serve as patient navigators for the patients who are sent to the Eastman Institute for care. They send release forms, health history, and other paperwork to the Eastman Institute prior to the teledentistry visit. The care coordinators will communicate and schedule the appointments for the patient. Additionally, the care coordinators will also coordinate transportation to the Eastman Institute, provide translation services if needed, and assist the patient in getting their physical exam completed prior to their visit at Eastman Institute.

After care is completed at Eastman Institute, the patient continues to be a patient of FLCH. The pediatric dentist sends paperwork of what was completed over to FLCH, where it is scanned into the electronic dental record. The care coordinators continue to work with the patient to ensure that they return to FLCH for a follow-up visit and for regular 3-month recalls for fluoride varnish and dental prophylaxis.

The pediatric dentist at the Eastman Institute reserves about 4 hours per month to complete these teledentistry consultations. Nearly 150 pediatric patients a year receive care through this teledentistry program at FLCH. In 2007, the completion rate for pediatric patients who needed care at the Eastman Institute was 15%. Currently, the completion rate is 94%. Since starting this program, FLCH has been able to identify affordable equipment like intraoral cameras. One drawback for the program is that in New York, there is not reimbursement for teledentistry. However, the teledentistry program has been sustainable due to offsetting costs with other sources of revenue within the organization. The Eastman Institute also accepts all insurance plans that FLCH takes.

There have been many benefits to this program. One is that patients and parents have been receptive and compliant due to the increased convenience. Many responsibilities of the parent are now completed by the care coordinators, such as scheduling and transportation. Parents and patients also do not have to drive 1 to 2 hours for a consultation appointment, then take another trip for treatment. Instead, there is only one trip which is to complete treatment. The pediatric patients are comfortable with the providers as well because they have seen the pediatric dentist before in the monitor at FLCH. With the partnership between FLCH and the Eastman Institute, wait times have also decreased to about 8 weeks to get an appointment at the Eastman Institute. This teledentistry program has been successful and sustainable thanks to partnerships and positive reception from staff.

A video of the Finger Lakes Community Health teledentistry program can be accessed here.

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