Health Center Oral Health Program Promising Practice

January 2021

Using Teledentistry to Ensure Continuity of Care during COVID-19

Organization: Petaluma Health Center

Summary:
Petaluma Health Center in Petaluma, California began teledentistry visits at the end of March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With a shelter in place order in California, a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the need for social distancing, Petaluma Health Center had to limit their in-person dental services to urgent and emergent care. They found that 100 dental patients were becoming overdue for care daily. In addition, many dental staff members could not work in the clinic due to social distancing requirements and PPE shortages. Petaluma Health Center was concerned about dental conditions worsening and the backlog that was developing. They were particularly concerned about a possible increase in referrals to hospitals for dental care under general anesthesia in children 0-5. Teledentistry was a viable option to help their patients continue to access dental services. Dental providers working from home would be able to provide care through teledentistry and patients could have their immediate concerns addressed.

The teledentistry program first started as an emergency triage service. Petaluma Health Center used grant funding to retain their dental staff on payroll while working from home to provide teledentistry visits. After testing and refining, Petaluma Health Center added preventive dental services for patients 0-5. The goal for the teledentistry program was to provide the same care as in clinic and to provide definitive care. Now, Petaluma Health Center provides many services via teledentistry including dental exams, caries risk assessments, motivational interviewing, self-management goal setting, nutritional counseling, case management, and oral health instructions. In addition, fluoride varnish is self-administered during the teledental visit. The parent or caregiver applies fluoride varnish with guidance from the dental provider.

All teledentistry visits at Petaluma Health Center are synchronous video visits between the patient, dentist, and dental assistant. They selected a synchronous model because they wanted to replicate what happens during an in-person visit. In addition, the dental providers were more comfortable with a video visit because to complete a dental exam, the dental providers relied on both live video and intraoral photographs submitted by the parents. Petaluma Health Center transitioned to eClinical Works as their electronic dental record in October. Prior to that, they were using Dentrix Enterprise. They use WebEx and doxy.me as their teledentistry platforms.

To begin the teledentistry program, Petaluma Health Center piloted the program with one dentist and one dental assistant. This strategy allowed the health center to adapt quickly and test changes before expanding the program. One finding was that patients needed support with the technology. It was important to develop clear instructions and information on how to prepare for the teledentistry visit and how to send intraoral photos to the dental provider ahead of the visit. To train the dental team for teledentistry, the Chief Dental Officer created a training
presentation. Petaluma Health Center also created written protocols. Additionally, they regularly survey dental staff satisfaction and conduct biweekly teledentistry meetings to gain quick feedback to continually improve the program. Petaluma Health Center also created a teledentistry chat room for real time collaboration. The chat room is used to share lessons learned with the dental staff from teledentistry visits. For example, dental staff can share things that worked and did not work during a teledentistry visit. Also, minutes from the biweekly teledentistry meetings are shared in the chat room.

To inform patients that Petaluma Health Center offers teledentistry, they advertise through patient newsletters, flyers distributed during medical visits, website advertising, and informing patients when they call the dental clinic.

Petaluma Health Center established their workflow for teledentistry visits through regular testing and improvements. Before the appointment, the dental assistant sends a text message to the patient that has information on how to prepare for the teledentistry visit. This includes how to take and send intraoral photos. Petaluma Health Center also sends their patients a self-care package in the mail. The package contains a toothbrush, toothpaste, fluoride varnish, varnish applicator, floss, gauze, gloves, disposable intraoral mirror, a snack guide, and a sticker. Five minutes before the appointment, the dental assistant will contact the patient to offer support with logging into the platform. When all the dental team and patient are online, the visit begins with introduction and obtaining consent. The dental assistant explains the process of teledentistry visits and completes questionnaires with the patient. Most of the dental history questions are open-ended to allow for active listening, affirmations, reflections, and summarizations. The dentist then reviews the photos and any current radiographs, and then completes the exam. The dentist decides on the risk level and creates a treatment plan that is discussed with the caregiver. Next, the parent or caregiver will demonstrate brushing and flossing technique and the dentist provides coaching. Then, the dentist provides guidance on applying fluoride varnish and the parent or caregiver will apply the fluoride varnish on the child’s teeth. Patients are given assistance with care coordination for follow-up appointments, which may include silver diamine fluoride application in a drive through setting, in clinic treatment or referral and risk based recall. Petaluma Health Center has a silver diamine fluoride drive-through program, which is another strategy to help navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. The dental assistant sends educational materials and a satisfaction survey to patient after the visit. The dentist sends prescription orders electronically to the health center.

In California, teledentistry visits are reimbursed if the patient is in pain or has an area of concern that was going to be addressed in-person but was cancelled due to the pandemic. Petaluma Health Center hopes that teledentistry will continue to be a reimbursed service line after the pandemic is over. In-person clinic capacity for dental visits will permanently be reduced due to enhanced infection control protocols. Teledentistry may help maintain and increase access to essential dental care. Additionally, California has legislation that allows parents or caregivers to apply fluoride varnish on their children’s teeth under supervision. It is important for health centers to review their legislature and reimbursement guidelines for what is allowable in their state.

Petaluma Health Center’s patient satisfaction with teledentistry visits is 95% from 491 surveys. The no-show rate for teledentistry visits is about 6%. Petaluma Health Center’s teledentistry no-show rate is much lower than their in-person visit no-show rate, which is 25%. The in-person no-show rate has increased in the last 3 months due to COVID-19. Some feedback from patients include that the teledentistry appointment allowed the family to continue to stay safe while still getting dental care. From March to December 2020, Petaluma Health Center provided hundreds
of teledentistry visits. The volume of teledentistry visits decreased since reopening due to reimbursement limitations, however. The patient demand for teledentistry visits is high. The Petaluma Health Center team believes that they could reach more patients if comprehensive and periodic exams via teledentistry would be reimbursed.

When considering a teledentistry program, Petaluma Health Center advises to replicate existing in-clinic workflows. The NNOHA website offers example workflows and resources for teledentistry programs. Additionally, connecting with other organizations who have teledentistry programs is essential in learning and innovating. NNOHA is conducting its second Teledentistry Study Club/ Learning collaborative to assist health centers in developing teledentistry programs and develop best practices. Teledentistry is an opportunity for integration of care. Teledentistry can expand the reach of the dental home and is a cost effective option to provide care for certain patient populations. Utilizing teledentistry is a viable option to help improve health outcomes and ensure continuity of care. Teledentistry aids in the chronic disease management and supports care prioritization for in-clinic visits. Here are examples of evidence based services that can be provided via teledentistry: Screening, Caries risk assessment, Motivational interviewing, Self-management goals, Oral hygiene instructions, Nutritional counseling, Treatment planning, Self-administered care: fluoride varnish, toothbrush prophylaxis, fluoride prescriptions, Diet modifications, Salivary stimulation, Case management, Pre-operative and post-operative care for in office visits. Patients receive more definitive care in-clinic when these services are provided via teledentistry.

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This project is/was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as a part of an award totaling $625,000 under grant number U30CS29051 with 0% financed with non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official view of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government.
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