

Telehealth apps in ObGyn practice

Four apps to help you connect with patients in the pandemic and beyond

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The COVID-19 pandemic has presented increasing demands on health care systems internationally. In addition to redistribution of inpatient health care resources, outpatient care practices evolved, with health care providers offering streamlined access to care to patients via telehealth.

Due to updated insurance practices, physicians now can receive reimbursement via private insurers, Medicare, and Medicaid (as determined by states) for telehealth visits both related and unrelated to COVID-19 care. Increased telehealth use has advantages, including increased health care access, reduced in-clinic wait times, and reduced patient and physician travel time. Within the field of obstetrics and gynecology, clinicians have used telehealth to maintain access to prenatal maternity care while redirecting resources and minimizing the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Additional advantages include provision of care during expanded

hours, including evenings and weekends, to increase patient access without increasing the demand on office support staff and the ability to bill for 5- to 10-minute phone counseling encounters.¹ Research shows that patients express satisfaction regarding the quality of telehealth care in the setting of prenatal care.²

In February 2020, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) released a Committee Opinion regarding telehealth use in ObGyn, a sign of telehealth's likely long-standing role within the field.³ Within the statement, ACOG commented on the increasing application of telemedicine in all aspects of obstetrics and gynecology and recommended that physicians become acquainted with new technologies and consider using them in their practice.

There is a large opportunity for development of mobile applications (apps) to further streamline telehealth-based medical care. During the pandemic, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services instituted waivers for telemedicine use on non-HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) compliant video communications products, such as Google+ Hangout and Skype. However, HIPAA-compliant video services are preferred, and many virtual apps have released methods for patient communication that meet HIPAA guidelines.^{1,4} These apps offer services such as phone- and video-based patient visits, appointment scheduling, secure physician-patient messaging, and electronic health record (EHR) documentation.

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App recommendations

To identify current mobile apps with clinical use for the ObGyn, we conducted a search

TABLE Four telehealth apps and their features

| | Doximity | OhMD | Spruce | Telehealth by SimplePractice |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Devices: iOS and Android | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Web browser | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Patient registration required | x | x | ✓ | x |
| Secure messaging—patients | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Secure messaging—colleagues | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Video appointments | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Appointment calendar | | | | ✓ |
| Push notifications | | | | ✓ |
| Patient appointment reminder | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Patient contact list | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Automated reply | | ✓ | | |
| Texting intake forms/surveys | | ✓ | | |
| Faxing | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Shared in-box for team collaboration | | | ✓ | |
| Patient progress notes | | | | ✓ |
| EHR integration | | ✓ | | Internal EHR |
| Price | Dialer: Free for physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants Dialer Pro: Monthly fee | Basic: Free Plus: Per use monthly fee Reach: Need quote | Basic: Monthly fee Communicator: Monthly fee | Monthly fee plus reduced monthly fee per additional user |

Abbreviation: EHR, electronic health record.

of the Apple App Store using the term “telehealth” between December 1, 2021 and January 1, 2022. We limited search results to apps that had at least 1,000 user ratings and to HIPAA-compliant user communication apps. Based on our review, we selected 4 apps to highlight here: Doximity, OhMD, Spruce, and Telehealth by SimplePractice (TABLE). We excluded apps that were advertised as having internal medical clinicians with first patient encounter on-demand through the app or that were associated with a singular insurance company or hospital system.

These apps are largely enabled for iOS and Android mobile devices and are offered at a range of price points for individual physician and practice-scale clinical implementation. Most apps offer secure messaging services between health care practitioners in addition to HIPAA-compliant patient

messaging. Some apps offer additional features with the aim to increase patient attendance; these include push notifications, appointment reminders, and an option for automated replies with clinic information. For an additional fee, several apps offer integration to established EHR systems.

An additional tool

The COVID-19 pandemic caused health care systems and individual clinicians to rapidly evolve their practices to maintain patient access to essential health care. Notably, the pandemic led to accelerated implementation of virtual health care services. Telehealth apps likely will become another tool that ObGyns can use to improve the efficiency of their clinical practice and expand patient access to care. ●

References

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