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Telehealth helps Medicaid population

By Tracey Walker

Over the next three years, approximately 400 Medicaid patients with heart failure or cardiovascular disease in six rural North Carolina communities will monitor their weight fluctuations with wireless remote monitoring. One of the primary goals of the program is to highlight the quality improvement and cost savings provided by remote monitoring programs in an effort to expand programs further and secure Medicaid reimbursement.

The program is being funded by a \$870,000 grant, one of the largest of its kind awarded, from the NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission (HWTF), which uses North Carolina's share of the national tobacco settlement to fund programs that promote preventive health.

“The remote monitoring program provides timely intervention for individuals who have a sudden increase in body weight, which is associated with hospitalization for heart failure,” says Jason Goldberg, founder and president of Toronto-based IDEAL LIFE, a telehealth company. The company's scale and blood pressure device are being used by patients in the program.

Each device sends readings to healthcare professionals who monitor the data and if necessary contact the patient's primary care provider, according to Goldberg.

Managed care organizations are struggling to find ways to manage patients not only in rural areas, but also those in urban locations who lack access to quality care, according to Goldberg.

The Obama administration is also championing telehealth as one way to hold down costs and improve access. However, until recently some telehealth programs have experienced limited success.

“Many were costly and incorporated complicated multi-step technologies and systems that patients found hard to use, causing many to drop out of programs,” Goldberg explains. “As a result, health plans were often hesitant to expand programs or provide reimbursement for some of the associated medical services.”

A recent study by PriceWaterhouseCoopers of telehealth programs implemented by the Veterans Health Administration found that one-half of respondents surveyed stated they would use telehealth program if made available.

Roanoke Chowan Community Health Center (RCCHC) was one of the first federally qualified health centers in the nation to complete a community-based telehealth network. It is one of the six counties to benefit from the state's grant.

“Community health leaders believe the program will help them to deliver better healthcare in a cost-effective manner to one of the most disadvantaged regions in the U.S.,” Goldberg says.

Successful programs nationwide are already proving the value of telehealth. For example, the PriceWaterhouseCoopers study found that use of healthcare system resources was reduced by 30% over six years using a telehealth program.



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