Telehealth: The Ethical Challenges of a New Technology

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Technological advances in society have brought tremendous improvements and convenience to its members. But, with the technology there is discovered a degree of depersonalization, as science is increasingly favored over art. For the healing encounter to attain its ultimate goal of patient benefit there must be a carefully balanced coalition of knowledge, clinical skill, and effective communication. But, there is a fourth ingredient that can only be discovered in the intimacy and trust of a shared personal interaction. That ingredient is personal awareness and touch that secures trust and reflects commitment to an ideal. Some have argued that health care requires pastoral as well as technical skills, art as well as science, and that the present health care culture, focusing on research and evidence-based medicine, is moving away from intimacy. Telehealth and telemedicine, as new and innovative technology, may encourage depersonalization and diminish the trust and intimacy that defines the relationship between patients and their health care providers.

Telehealth technology has existed for two decades, making health care available to many patients in remote and otherwise underserved areas. Many patients have benefited by telehealth systems that would not otherwise have had adequate access to health care. Telemedicine has also enabled distance education and the rapid, efficient sharing of information, not only with patients but also between providers who are separated either geographically or within institutions. Utilizing this form of technology has been shown to be cost effective and has

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resulted in beneficial health outcomes for chronically ill patients

and for other vulnerable populations who find it difficult to travel distances to receive care.

Patients have expressed satisfaction with telecommunication because of the focused and

uninterrupted attention they get from their healthcare providers. Providers have also been

satisfied when using telehealth. From a technological and evidence-based standpoint, it would

appear that the virtual visit, like the face-to-face visit, is as reliable and valid a manifestation of

the healing relationship as the face-to-face encounter. But, there are unique ethical concerns.

The telemedicine encounter and the transmission of patient information are guided by the same

ethical principles that have informed all aspects of professional behavior. The ethical issues

unique to telemedicine relate to the potential impact on the healing relationship, which go

beyond the expected challenges of privacy and confidentiality. The loss of touch, the potential

for depersonalization, the potential for exploitation, the possible inequity when distributing the

benefits of telehealth services, and the potential burden that this form of new technology may

impose on sick and dying patients are some of the ethical concerns that should be considered.

Future research and educational initiatives should explore areas of ethical concern that

pertain to the innovative and burgeoning field of telehealth, and the potential for good and harm

that may result. Potential themes include the following:

- Improving health care access in underserved populations
- Professional expectations in meeting a new, higher standard of car
- Telemedicine as a potential new form of access discrimination
- Technology as added burden for patients with chronic and terminal illness
- When virtual visits "replace" actual visits
- The impact of "loosing touch" on trust and the healing relationship
- The risk of exploitation when using new and expensive technology
- Depersonalization in the use of store and forward technology
- Privacy and confidentiality issues