



How OU Medicine and OU Physicians Leveraged Existing Telehealth Infrastructure to Broaden Care Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary: When COVID-19 struck the United States in March 2020, OU Medicine leveraged the existing infrastructure of its virtual care program to quickly scale its response to the pandemic. The health system grew its virtual care team to support a large-scale rollout, and adopted a “train-the-trainer” approach to rapidly onboard more than 800 providers and 500 staff to its virtual care program in the OU Physicians Medical Group. Through the swift acceleration of its existing virtual care program, OU Physicians has completed more than 60,000 virtual visits during the pandemic, averaging roughly 900 visits per day at the peak of the pandemic.

OU Medicine: Existing Virtual Care Infrastructure

In July 2019, OU Medicine partnered with Amwell to roll out a virtual care program, OU Medicine Health Connect. The program, which comprised primary care services in OU Physician clinics, postoperative visits, and a pain management clinic, proved critical for the health system with the arrival of COVID-19.

As the pandemic began to spread across the country, OU Medicine strategized around how best to leverage this virtual care foundation to thoughtfully approach its response to COVID-19. The health system knew its pandemic response had to be timely, responsive, and collaborative in order to serve patients from across the state of Oklahoma, as well as in adjacent states. With that in mind, the leadership team began to ask itself: “How do we connect with all our patients in the safest and most appropriate manner possible?”

With the patient experience a top priority, OU Medicine decided to focus on rapidly expanding its virtual care services across the health system enterprise, which would allow it to manage medical conditions and appropriately prescribe medication remotely.

OU Medicine At a Glance



OU Medicine, along with its partner, the University of Oklahoma's College of Medicine and Health Sciences Center, is the only comprehensive academic health system of hospitals, clinics, and centers of excellence in the state of Oklahoma. Located near downtown Oklahoma City, OU Medicine is home to the state's largest physician network, with more than 11,000 employees, 1,200 credentialed providers, and 750 physicians, providing a complete range of specialty care for adults and children. OU Medicine also serves the region with the state's only freestanding children's hospital, National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center, Level I trauma center, and Level IV NICU.

Accelerating Virtual Care and Adapting to COVID-19 Conditions


The first step in OU Medicine's COVID-19 response was to create an alternate pathway for care delivery. After dramatically reducing the number of in-person visits in its hospital and clinic settings, OU Medicine identified which staff could be sent home to work remotely and immediately introduced virtual care to all credentialed providers and support staff.

At the time, OU Medicine's virtual care project team was made up of just one person, which made rapid expansion and training extremely difficult. In response, OU Physicians secured two additional telehealth project managers and a retired RN to support the virtual care team in training providers, moving visits to virtual care, answering questions, and assisting with the large-scale rollout of the virtual program. This core team was trained on the OU Medicine Health Connect app first, allowing them to centralize intake and cascade implementation with a "train-the-trainer" approach.

From there, they engaged the leadership teams in all 76 OU Physicians ambulatory clinics to coordinate schedules. They ensured only complex patients were being seen in person and the rest were transitioned to virtual care.

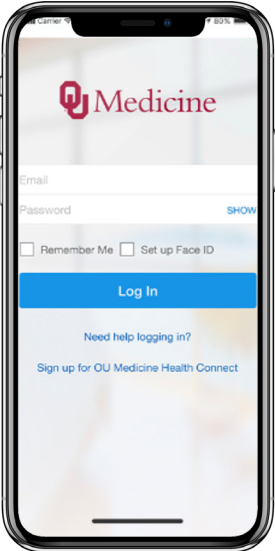
Transitioning In-Person Care to Virtual: A Patient Guide

1.



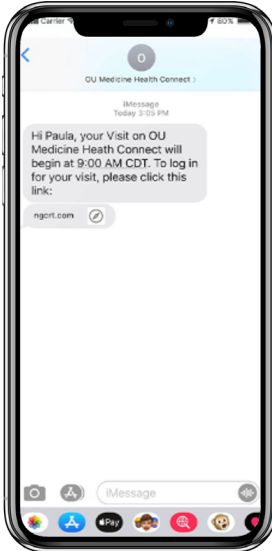
Schedule an appointment with an OU Medicine physician by calling the clinic.

2.



Download the OU Medicine Health Connect app and create your account.

3.



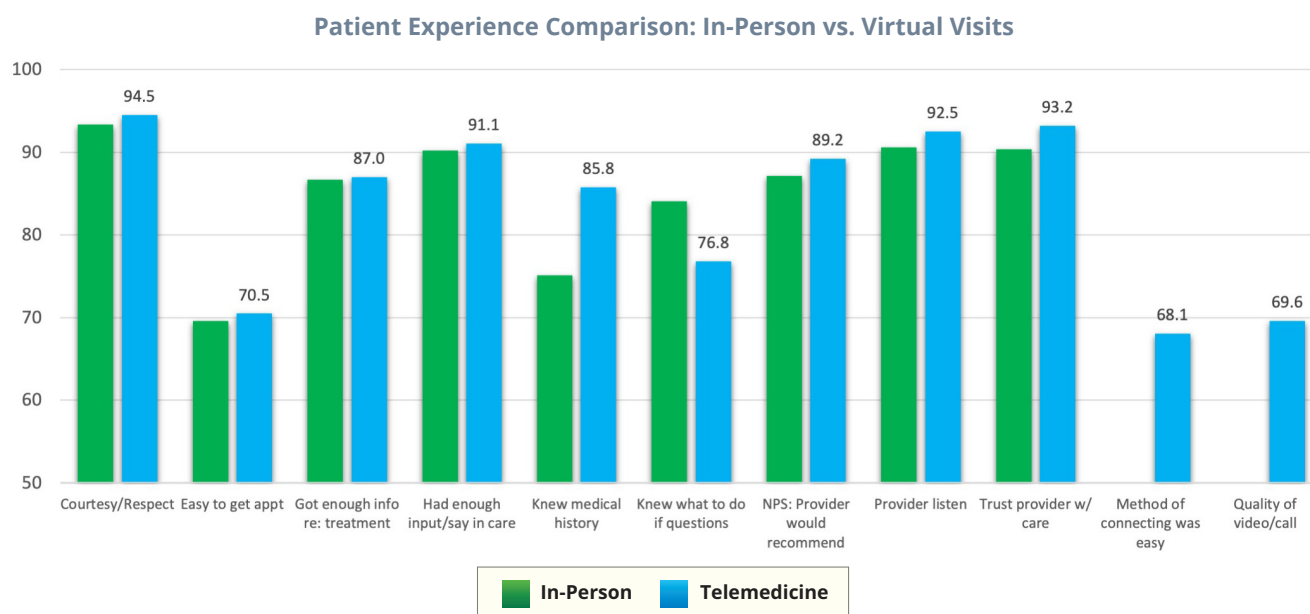
Use the app when it is time for your appointment.

OU Physicians also launched large provider training sessions. Conducted over videoconference, these sessions were used to train more than 800 providers and 500 staff members (averaging roughly 300 attendees in each session) on how to use telehealth. OU Medicine recorded and distributed these training sessions afterward, so providers and staff could review and reference the videos on their own.

Having implemented this "train-the-trainer" approach, the virtual care project team was free to focus on registering all credentialed providers and support staff on the telehealth system, configuring the system for optimum provider and staff use, and distributing job-specific aids and training materials. The team also assisted with troubleshooting by answering trainer questions.

The Results of OU Medicine's Virtual Care Strategy Shift

Since March 2020, OU Medicine has conducted more than 60,000 virtual visits. In the early weeks of the pandemic, the health system conducted an average of 900 virtual visits per day. Currently, more than 65,000 patients have enrolled in the virtual program.



Through this rapid expansion of virtual care, OU Medicine never lost sight of the patient experience. OU Physicians launched a new telemedicine patient survey. Over the past eight months, approximately 27,000 patient surveys have been completed, of which 4,300 are from patients who have had at least one virtual visit with an OU Physician. OU Medicine found that virtual care outperformed in-person care for nearly all its patient satisfaction measures. “Our patients were so appreciative,” says Bobbie Beirne, associate director of operations for the health system’s Stephenson Cancer Center Clinics. “So many patients thanked us for what we were doing to keep them safe and to be able to continue their care.”

Overall, the ability to see patients virtually allowed OU Medicine to provide a high level of quality care to patients while simultaneously maintaining a steady revenue stream. OU Medicine believes the key to its COVID-19 response was deploying its already existing infrastructure quickly without waiting for circumstances to be perfect.

“We did not sit and wait for perceived perfection . . . We acted swiftly and surely, and made decisions based on what was going to be best for our patients, our providers, and our staff,” said Beirne.

Optimizing Virtual Care for the Road Ahead

Even after virtual visits began to level off when its clinics reopened for in-person care, OU Medicine has seen enduring interest in and demand for telehealth from providers and patients. Moving forward, the health system is working to identify the best way to integrate telehealth into clinic schedules to increase efficiency. With this objective in mind, OU Physicians is assessing the following elements in clinic schedules:

- **Patient cohort.** What diagnoses are best suited for virtual care versus in-person care within a given practice/specialty?
- **Space.** Are there non-exam rooms in the clinic for providers to conduct virtual appointments?
- **Time.** Does the average virtual visit duration match the in-person visit duration?
- **Demand.** Is there larger demand than what the physical clinic space can handle?
- **Virtual offerings.** What types of virtual visits should be offered by clinic providers?

Sample of OU Medicine Virtual Clinic Rotation

	MONDAY		TUESDAY		WEDNESDAY		THURSDAY		FRIDAY	
	8-12	12-4	8-12	12-4	8-12	12-4	8-12	12-4	8-12	12-4
A	Tele	Clinic	Clinic	Clinic	Tele	Clinic	Clinic	Clinic	Tele	Clinic
B	Clinic	Clinic	Tele	Tele	Clinic	Clinic	Tele	Tele	Clinic	Clinic
C	Clinic	Tele	Clinic	Clinic	Clinic	Tele	Clinic	Clinic	Clinic	Tele

OU Medicine anticipates this assessment will expand provider capacity and patient access, maximize the utilization of ambulatory resources, and strengthen referrals. OU Medicine also believes this will help the team mitigate the chaos a potential resurgence in COVID-19 may cause while combating flu and other respiratory illnesses in the fall and winter.

COVID-19 may have accelerated the expansion and development of OU Medicine's virtual care offerings, but now the health system is positioned to continue building on its virtual infrastructure and further optimizing and standardizing its methods. OU Medicine hopes this will provide more value to patients, help clinics succeed, and lead to a more robust, comprehensive care ecosystem for the state of Oklahoma and beyond.