The House Call of the 21st Century: Telemedicine

Cisco and insurance giant UnitedHealthGroup are building a national telehealth network. Soon, it will reach into millions of patients’ homes.

The future of health care may be shaped as much by the technology initiatives under way today as by the 1,000-page legislative packages being churned out in Washington. One major initiative is the “Connected Care” program that networking powerhouse Cisco Systems and insurance provider UnitedHealthGroup have teamed up to build.

Connected Care – to which UnitedHealthGroup has committed tens of millions of dollars – will be the first national telehealth network, letting patients see doctors remotely when they can’t see them in person. Combining audio and video technology with health resources, the network will expand physicians’ reach into rural, urban and other underserved areas.

Telemedicine isn’t new. Virtually every large hospital has some kind of program to connect specialists with outlying clinics and community hospitals, and institutions like prisons often use telemedicine because moving patient/inmates under guard is expensive. What’s new is the scale: UnitedHealthGroup has nearly 600,000 doctors and 5,000 hospitals in its provider network, and counts more than 70 million Americans as customers. Cisco, of course, is a leader in telepresence and other collaborative network technologies. A program on this scale could make telemedicine the norm rather than the exception.

UnitedHealthGroup has 70 million customers and 600,000 doctors on its rolls. Its Connected Care program could make video-based telemedicine the norm rather than the exception, profoundly changing the way health care is delivered.

The DocTor Will See You Now – on TV

Now, patients won’t have to be in hospitals (or jails) to experience telemedicine. The Connected Care program will start by creating telemedicine offices in easily accessible locations: workplaces, stores, rural community centers, even mobile 18-wheel clinics. Property owners and developers might find that a Connected Care center in their community is a great differentiator for a property.

The next step will be bringing telemedicine into the home, using the television-based home telepresence solution that Cisco expects to introduce next year. That’s why the CEO of UnitedHealthGroup calls Connected Care the “house call for the 21st century.”

Connected Care is being built on an open network, so that electronic health records and other medical IT systems can be easily integrated. It will support real-time consultations with doctors, nurses, and other health professionals, and also let the health professionals talk with each other. Security and privacy are built into the system.

Will patients accept the program? In a recent pilot project with Cisco employees in California, 90 percent of participants said they would recommend the program to others. UnitedHealth Group employees in Minneapolis are preparing to participate in a similar pilot, and other tests are being performed in partnership with health education groups so that health providers can develop best practices for using the system.

For example, the international health education and humanitarian assistance organization Project HOPE will use a Connected Care mobile clinic to help New Mexico residents obtain health screenings and treatment for diabetes and other chronic diseases.

Connected Care should also be a boon to medical education. The Association of American Medical Colleges estimates that due to population growth, aging and other factors, this country is facing a potential shortage of 159,000 primary care physicians by 2025. “Educating and training more physicians is a long-term solution to addressing this country’s physician shortage. Through Connected Care, we can advance access to medicine in America and spread clinical expertise over greater distances today to people who are suffering from inadequate access to care,” says Reed V. Tuckson, M.D., executive vice president and chief of medical affairs, United-Health Group. BBP

You can read more about the Connected Care initiative at www.ConnectedCareAmerica.com.