



The Future of Healthcare: Teladoc and the rise and possible fall of telemedicine

Varsha Vijay



Introduction and Teladoc in Abstract

The history of telemedicine can be traced back to the use of telegrams during wartime, and this practice and process was coined by Thomas Bird in 1970. It was developed out of need. During wartime, when injuries and deaths were imminent, to get medical help for soldiers and high ranking officials, communication with doctors instantly was crucial to saving lives. Telegrams were used to describe the medical situations and medical assistance needed, and medical professionals would try and identify the symptoms and medical situation of their patient to make a “virtual” diagnosis and get the right medicine and people to their patient. Over 50 years have passed since the first rough idea of telemedicine, and as technology has rapidly evolved, so has the field of telemedicine. The evolution of telemedicine has allowed organizations and hospitals to provide quicker and more efficient services to patients all across the globe, including underserved and rural areas where there is no access to proper medical professionals and medical resources. Since the boom of technology and the increased access to internet and proper technological devices, the growth of telemedicine companies has only increased, leading to competition between companies. Teladoc is the oldest and largest telemedicine company throughout all of the United States, making it a tough contender for newer and younger telemedicine companies. Despite their ironclad reputation, Teladoc Health has been actively looking for new avenues of expansion, including their latest implementation of mental health services. The company has kept its initial emphasis on providing basic care to rural and underserved areas, highlighting it on their website and their ventures overall. Besides their initial initiative, Teladoc has also emphasized the use of telemedicine making proper medical care and supervision for certain people who have a chronic condition or a disability which would make it difficult to visit a doctor’s office in person. The company’s intentions and target consumer base is pretty clear, with a bold and positive impact on certain populations and communities that otherwise wouldn’t otherwise get medical attention, but sadly, the company seems to be veering off track.

The Good Within Telemedicine

When the COVID-19 Pandemic hit in early 2020, the world came to a halting stop. The health concerns and fears were through the roof, and the CDC had to fight to gain the nation’s attention and trust. Fearing for their lives, most people chose to quarantine within their homes. A majority of the nation took caution and wore masks, sanitized, got tested, and followed the CDC’s protocols to reduce the risk of catching COVID. In the midst of the raging issue of COVID-19, other health issues and diseases were overlooked, and people who were injured or sick were either unable to go to doctor’s offices in person or were too scared to go in person, putting themselves and the people living with them at risk for COVID-19, and overall just posing a risk to their health. In the midst of this global crisis, the telemedicine industry emerged like a savior. Telemedicine allowed patients to get a diagnosis from the safety of their home and determine their next steps cautiously under the direction and advice of a medical professional. Although the COVID-19 Pandemic was a deadly and serious situation for the United States and the world as a whole, it allowed the telemedicine industry to grow and prove to be a valuable technology for medical professionals and patients. The evolution of telemedicine technology and the growth of its consumer base was stimulated by the pandemic, giving the industry as a whole a major spike in the span of the two years that COVID was a global health issue.



The Problem

There are holes within the telemedicine industry that bring about the possibility of a decline in telemedicine and telemedicine companies worldwide if they are not addressed and change is not made. According to the National Institute of Health, it is unclear whether Teladoc is actually increasing accessibility to medical professionals and medical help in accordance with the company's claims of reaching rural and underserved areas. This is proven by data that shows that the vast majority of Teladoc's patients and consumers are not in rural or underserved areas, disproving the claim of the target consumer base being in rural and/or underserved areas. In comparison with actual doctor's offices, with Teladoc's services, there is a reduced inclination towards ordering and executing further medical tests on patients, which could be a mistake if there was a potential symptom the patient was showing and the patient wasn't sent to do further tests to ensure that everything is okay, posing a risk to the patient's health. For example, there is a poorer adherence to proper antibiotic prescription guidelines for bronchitis in comparison to regular doctor's offices. Again, this poses a risk to the patient's health and takes away from the credibility of the company. It is clear that the company and telemedicine as a whole is not fully competitive with the original services and quality that in person doctor's visits provide. Yes, the telemedicine industry did spike out of necessity during the COVID-19 Pandemic, but after things have calmed down, telemedicine is starting to fade out of the picture.

The Future of Teladoc and Telemedicine

The National Institute of Health called Teladoc out on the fact that the majority of their patients are not the patients from rural and underserved areas as the company had indicated as a major part of their mission and problem statement. Instead, the majority of their consumers were users using the technology for convenience and easy accessibility, leading to a big proportion of users being in areas with access to technology and doctors. While this does reflect at least semi-poorly on Teladoc Health because of their initiative to reach rural and underserved areas, this result may turn out to be the saving grace of the telemedicine industry. It is clear that Teladoc and the telemedicine industry needs to reconsider who their target consumer base is and what to do to remain competitive against doctors and hospitals. If Teladoc makes convenience the focus of their products and services rather than expanding their initiatives, they can attract and retain a new part of the nation's population. Teladoc and telemedicine must adapt to the ever evolving world and make the most of what they can to keep the industry alive and growing. Some examples of what can be done include integrating with existing healthcare systems and hospitals as one of their Teladoc's competitors Amwell has chosen to do in order to make telemedicine a tool of efficiency and consistency. Teladoc should also focus on their specialization of chronic care management and aid to the disabled to help them keep an advantage. There is no doubt that telemedicine is an incredible tool for the medical world, it must adapt to the needs of the healthcare industry and existing medicine to increase its efficiency and prove to be an essential piece of technology to gain trust and prominence within the world of today. One strong recent example of Teladoc adapting is the incorporation of AI into their services. Teladoc is leveraging AI services like Microsoft's Integration with OpenAI and Nuance Dragon Ambient eXperience to automate clinical documentation of appointments. AI algorithms can scan electronic health records to create patient profiles that give clinicians context to deliver effective episodic care, an important initiative that the company is focusing on.



References

Gajarawala SN, Pelkowski JN. Telehealth Benefits and Barriers. *J Nurse Pract.* 2021 Feb;17(2):218-221. doi: 10.1016/j.nurpra.2020.09.013. Epub 2020 Oct 21. PMID: 33106751; PMCID: PMC7577680.

Reichert, Peter S., and Naomi Joy Levan Halpern. "FDA Regulation of Telemedicine Devices." *Food and Drug Law Journal*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1997, pp. 517–23. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26659892>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2024.

Sunil Ramlochan - Enterprise AI Strategist. "Teladoc Health Incorporates Microsoft's AI Technology - Evolution in Telehealth." *Prompt Engineering*, Prompt Engineering, 18 July 2023, promptengineering.org/the-future-of-telehealth-how-ai-is-revolutionizing-virtual-care/#:~:text=Enhancing%20Patient%2DProvider%20Interactions&text=AI%20algorithms%20can%20scan%20electronic,listen%20in%20on%20telehealth%20consultations.

Uscher-Pines L, Mulcahy A, Cowling D, Hunter G, Burns R, Mehrotra A. Access and Quality of Care in Direct-to-Consumer Telemedicine. *Telemed J E Health.* 2016 Apr;22(4):282-7. doi: 10.1089/tmj.2015.0079. Epub 2015 Oct 21. PMID: 26488151; PMCID: PMC4968275.