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COVID-19 sparking innovative uses of existing technologies

By Steven Ross Johnson

HOSPITALS ARE QUICKLY ADAPTING technologies like remote monitoring and telehealth to bolster their efforts to manage COVID-19 cases.

Prior to the pandemic, Boston Medical Center already monitored intensive-care unit patient rooms via 24 cameras so health-care personnel could be alerted if patients fell out of bed or suddenly risked harming themselves or a staff member.

Once the hospital got a surge in coronavirus patients, it soon became clear that critical-care unit staffers were overwhelmed and unable to provide the needed level of close monitoring, said Nancy Gaden, senior vice president and chief nursing officer at BMC.

So installing 12 additional cameras in isolation rooms was proposed, thus allowing nurses to constantly monitor up to 12 patients simultaneously.

"I wish I could say that right when COVID-19 began that I thought of this idea, but that would not be the case," Gaden said. "Really it was necessity is the mother of invention."

Similar uses of remote monitoring technology have been deployed throughout Ascension's national network of hospitals. Carrie Stover, senior director of AscensionConnect, the health system's arm coordinating the use of patient video-monitoring technology, said remote video devices have monitored more than 800 patients since the outbreak began.

AscensionConnect typically monitors patients from a centralized hub in St. Louis, which serves as an adjunct to front-line staff. But the pandemic required modifying the system to allow nurses and other clinical staff to view patients and interact with them from monitoring stations.

Though it was difficult to measure how many in-room visits have been avoided, Stover said there have been approximately 30,000 verbal patient interactions conducted via the system.

"If you think about a patient who either has COVID or is under investigation (for COVID) when the nurse wants to ask them a question, or evaluate their pain, or ask them if they need something, to be able to do that without having to go into the room has been a great help for nursing," Stover said.

Brad Playford, CEO of remote monitoring platform creator AvaSure, said while the pandemic has caused a lull in first-time buyers, existing users have been ordering more monitors.

AvaSure gave away a few hundred software monitoring stations to existing customers so they can view more patients; it also



Modifying existing technologies like remote monitoring allows clinicians to check in on more patients at the same time.

added a "COVID" category to the platform's data analytics feature, allowing providers to see how many devices were used for coronavirus patients, he said.

Capitalizing on an existing telehealth program has helped Banner Health manage its surge in patients. Dr. Matthew Anderson, innovation lead at the Phoenix-based system, said telehealth is being used to triage and screen patients and to determine their treatment and whether they need to be admitted.

"We can connect with our patients in their home so we can find out some of the symptoms ahead of time, give them advice and kind of know where the next steps of care are," Anderson said.

Bret Larsen, CEO of eVisit, which provides Banner's telehealth platform, has added a COVID-19 screening tool. From February to March, eVisit's clients saw a 236% increase in telehealth visits, Larsen said.

CMS' recent rollback of telehealth reimbursement regulations helped accelerate Banner's move to more fully embrace such services, Anderson said.

"I don't see us ever going back to saying we're not going to do this again and make it harder for people to get care," Anderson said. ●