

## Crossing the frontier into a new era of telehealth

In early 2020, when COVID-19 arrived in Oregon, patients were understandably wary of setting foot in an actual clinic. Yet the need for health care — routine, acute and virus-related — was enormous. OHSU was ready with an answer.

“Through years of investment and dedication, we already had a solid telehealth foundation on which to build,” said Mark Lovgren, director of telehealth services at OHSU.

Established in 2010, the OHSU Telemedicine Network includes hospitals and clinics across Oregon and Southwest Washington. One of the goals of this network had always been to provide patients with access to specialty medical care not available in their communities, primarily for stroke, neonatal and urgent pediatric needs.

But as the virus spread, and the need for virtual health care across disciplines became clear, the team behind the Telemedicine Network pivoted to expand the capacity to all OHSU clinicians — a total of 1,200 licensed health care professionals.

“We had a five-year plan that we accomplished in a few weeks,” said George Keepers, M.D., chair of the department of psychiatry in the OHSU School of Medicine.

The effect of this effort was dramatic. Before the ramp-up, digital care visits were running at about 2,000 every month. Since then, OHSU telehealth visits have skyrocketed, now averaging about 35,000 per month.

And while that high volume of patient visits will not likely outlast COVID-19, most experts — in Oregon and across the nation — believe telehealth is here to stay. The experience has demonstrated to both providers and patients that many routine visits can be handled with a phone call or a virtual visit.

As part of the transition to telehealth, OHSU is actively engaged with hospitals and clinics around the state who want to expand their own telehealth capacity. The ongoing advantages to patients and communities are significant, especially in rural settings where there are fewer providers.

“We’ve crossed into a new era, and we want to ensure all Oregonians benefit from this evolution,” Lovgren said.

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Director of telehealth services  
OHSU

