

AUA Inside Tract Podcast Transcript
Episode No. 86

Getting your Practice Up and Running with Telemedicine with Dr. Eugene Rhee

Host: We're back here on the "AUA Inside Tract" podcast. The current global outbreak of COVID-19 is making a significant impact on healthcare delivery in the United States. As the American College of Surgeons and others urge postponing elective procedures, clinicians are looking for ways to minimize disruption of day-to-day patient care in their urology clinics. Telehealth and telemedicine are emerging as possible options for urologists. I want to kick off a conversation about getting your practice up and running with telemedicine, and I'm joined today by Dr. Eugene Rhee. Dr. Rhee, please just initiate this discussion by telling us why tele-urology is so relevant right now, and why we need to be having this conversation.

Dr. Rhee: Sure. Thanks a lot for getting this organized quickly. For the listeners, you all must know the AUA has been involved in telemedicine in urology since 2016. Before, it was advocating for access to care, making sure that we can hit rural areas of the country, noting that 60% of the counties in the United States do not have a urologist in practice. What's happening today, as you all know, throughout the world, is that the COVID-19 outbreak is a very serious issue in regards to how we deliver healthcare. And in line with sort of what we're doing with the AUA activities, there are links, as well as resources on the links that we are going to send out as a bulletin. So keep an eye on that.

In fact, I think that this podcast will be affiliated with that bulletin. The design of this is to create a communication stream that's not overwhelming, but certainly for those who have just started, or thinking about starting telemedicine neurology, the time is now. And I think it's really relevant because just on March 6, which is last week, the president signed into law the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriation Act, which is H.P.6074, that includes provisions to allow telehealth be widely used in the Medicare population during what is declared now as a national emergency.

And so we are in a new normal in regards to how we deliver telemedicine in urology. And the AUA has really been prepared in the sense that we have a white paper to refer to.

Host: I want to ask about some of the considerations that urologists need to think about before they move forward with implementing telemedicine and telehealth services. I want to ask you about how they might get started. Of

course, this package of resources is a great place to start, but I also want to ask about insurance implications and what we should be thinking about or know about with that.

Dr. Rhee: So, it's a good question. Really rubber meets the road is, where is the reimbursement for telemedicine? And things are very fluid. I know we constantly talk about that, but this just got passed into law, and I take it the workflows will need to be worked out with CMS as one payer. The other one is even about state legislation. That also is a spreadsheet that's offered in this bulletin that we'll provide in regards to state telehealth statutes. And in addition, for the most part, there is nothing that prohibits a person from receiving services via telehealth, you know, provided that the laws such as licensing and privacy are met.

The real question you're asking, and I think the listeners really wanna know is, "Will my insurance cover telehealth visits?" And, you know, everything is happening as we speak, including restaurants and bars closing, and gyms closing now. And so the situation will be changing with each new piece of information. So I think the AUA will monitor and provide that information, but you need to check with each of the payers on a private level, and private insurance level to make sure and confirm that the telehealth visit will be covered.

Host: Dr. Rhee, you mentioned that now is the time for telemedicine and telehealth, and I wanna ask you a little bit more to elaborate on what you meant by that, and why the urgency is so important right now.

Dr. Rhee: There's a popular quote that I'll introduce, and that is, never let a good crisis go to waste. The point is that telemedicine in urology in this time of crisis, with this viral spread, will serve really four purposes, and I want to be very clear to the listeners. The first one is to minimize the human spread of COVID-19, and aid in the global effort to contain this pandemic. The second reason is that we want to maintain the access of patients to urologists, who invariably will find themselves under a quarantine condition.

The third is to reduce the economic impact to urology practices, including urologists, their employees and staff who number in the hundreds of thousands across the country, and the employees are business-dependent [SP] on the delivery of these urologic services. And finally, the fourth is that many staff members in their clinics will not be able to continue to work in an in-person setting due to...childcare, as an example, that we're seeing, I mean, just a few days ago with people attending school at home.

And so telemedicine allows some of these staff to work from home, and provide scheduling triage and even prepping patients for virtual visits. I mean, in general, Casey, we expect the slope of the adoption to be steeper now with this unprecedented situation. It's not to panic. It's to really just look at the opportunity that we've laid out for ourselves in this specialty. If the listener is starting to do this, or dabbling in it, so to speak, this is the time to operationalize.

The fight we've had is to advocate for licensure and reimbursement. I can predict with fair certainty that this is going to change pretty dramatically over the next several weeks. So I'll end with thanking you for our time, but I am not the only one. There's a whole village of urologists who we will ask to be involved in podcasts so that you may listen to these in regards to much more particular detail as we get a more comprehensive update moving forward.

Host: I want to thank our guest today, Dr. Eugene Rhee, the incoming Public Policy Council chair for the AUA for hopping on this special bonus episode of the AUA's "Inside Tract" podcast. Thank you for tuning in.