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# Healthy Aging: Leveraging Telehealth to Support Caregivers and Those They Care For

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During ATA's Telehealth Awareness Week (TAW) a distinguished panel of experts explored how telehealth can support caregivers and help them better support their loved ones.

Caregivers are key stakeholders in the use of telehealth and digital health. Telehealth can do more than enhance a caregiver's experience, it can also help to reduce their burden. But, family caregivers are instrumental in supporting both community-based and institutional healthcare services. It's been estimated that it would cost \$470 billion annually to replace family caregiving with paid services.

Caregivers of adult family members are, on average, 49.4 years old, with a median age of 51 years. The average age of the caregiving recipient is 68.9 years and 46% of recipients are 75-plus. While it's important to understand caregiver age bands, as well as the age ranges of the people they are caring for, it's also important to understand how caregivers and their loved ones use technology.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented demand on the use of technology. In 2019, less than half of adults age 50-plus ever used video chat. In 2020, 70% have used it, with one in three using video chat weekly.

According to AARP's **2021 Tech Trends and the 50+**, there has been an 194% increase in technology spending among older adults compared to 2019. On average older adults spend \$269 a month (16% of their budget) on tech expenses such as internet, cellphone, cable, and streaming services. In fact, ownership of smartphones among the 50-plus has increased significantly year over year. Those 70-plus increased the most, up from 62% in 2019. Older adults continue to use smartphones to gather information and to connect socially but activities that make life easier such as financial transactions and ordering groceries gained traction.

Rani Snyder, MPA, Vice President, Program, The John A. Hartford Foundation, agrees that older adults are using technology more and more, though there are some challenges. Take social media. As of 2019, only 40% of people who are age 65 and older are using social media.

Shifting back to medical care and the use of digital health technologies, a recent study conducted in the UK looked at whether clinicians are prescribing digital health for adults aged 18 to over 65. In this study, it turned out that clinicians were only prescribing digital health tools to individuals 65 and older 4% of the time. They prescribe



digital health tools 10 times more often for 18- to 34-year-olds, and after age 45 digital health is prescribed less and less. The same study revealed that over half of those 65 years and older actually want digital tools.

Charlotte Yeh, MD, chief medical officer of AARP Services, discussed how caregivers are using technology. Over half of caregivers are using a range of technology tools and about 35% use technology for tracking finances. About 3 out of 10 caregivers are using technology for personal health records, but they go online for very practical, pragmatic reasons.

One-third of caregivers are searching for resources such as AIDS facilities or looking for help on day-to-day tasks caring for their loved ones.

So, what should be considered when designing for an older generation and for caregivers?

**Designing for success.** It's very important to design for all, because if you make it work for an 85-year-old it'll work for a four-year-old and for everyone in between, according to Dr. Yeh.

Rani agreed that universal design is so important and doing right by older adults almost always means that we're doing right by everyone.

**"Independence on the go."** It's important to enhance independence in the home, and remote monitoring can play an important role here. But as we learned during

**Addressing social isolation.** One example of an initiative from the Center of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE). With regard to social isolation, PACE allows people eligible to move into nursing homes to instead stay in their own homes and community. The aim is to reduce loneliness and increase socialization by providing day services that include medical care and daily activity support, such as assistance with eating and dressing. During COVID, PACE set up phone trees to help participants stay in touch with friends and family, and offered daily activities for participants and their caregivers. Ideally, PACE programs would be available across the country, especially in rural communities.

MaryAnne Sterling, CEA, Advocate and Family Caregiver, and Executive Vice President, Caregiver Experience, has been in charge of facilitating virtual

visits between hospitalized COVID patients and their families. "I cannot think of a more important use of telehealth in this moment."

**Lens of Equity.** One of the things that the pandemic has highlighted is the inequality around how we care for older adults, as well as health disparities attributed to factors including race, ethnicity and socio economic status.

The imperative going forward is that telehealth and digital health programs must be designed to be measured against the lens

of equity. Consider if there are algorithms in your programming that create bias because of how the data is input. Are you aggregating your data in a way that helps you to understand race, ethnicity and culture, gender preferences, and other attributes in your patient population in order to understand experiences?

The panelists agreed that it is imperative to explicitly include equity in any digital health design.



the pandemic, if you're stuck at home, you need a connection to your community. Dr. Yeh notes that it's not enough to create independence within the home, but also "independence on the go."

Dr. Yeh explains that people need to feel connected, to be contributing and a vital part of society. "Where is the joy in one's purpose?" she asks, "What is the community connection that you are bringing with your telehealth platform?"

Finally, here are a few practical solutions to ensuring that telehealth is used appropriately and is helpful to caregivers and older adults.

**Conduct a technical check:** Do a tech check before a virtual visit to make sure the right equipment is in place and everyone knows how to use it to ensure the success of the visit. The last thing you want to do is have an unsuccessful visit because of technology problems.

MaryAnne Sterling agrees, “We need a whole workforce in this area, to provide better support for patients and families using technologies, learning together.”

**Importance of captioning.** Captioning helps make sure that information is accessible, understandable, and available, even if the patient is not hard of hearing. It allows an older patient to easily follow along if people are speaking too fast or using technical terms.

**Consider caregiver workflow.** When you're designing telehealth programs, don't just consider workflow within a physician practice. You should also design telehealth programs that improve workflow for the caregiver. Remember, they are part of your workforce as well.



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