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North Texas doctors ready to chat

NowClinic to offer video appts. for routine care

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DIGITAL-AGE HOUSE CALLS: Dr. Matt Weyenberg of Village Health Partners in Plano is going to start seeing patients through online video chats.

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At least five North Texas doctors' groups have signed up to be among the first nationwide to offer patients a digital-age version of the traditional house call when they go live with online video chats.

MedicalEdge Health Group PA and Genesis Physicians Group, both in Dallas, Texas Health Care LLC in Fort Worth and Plano Physician's Group and Village Health Partners, also in Plano, will allow their physicians to treat patients through NowClinic, a new service designed to connect physicians and patients via virtual visits.

NowClinic is offered through OptumHealth, a division of **UnitedHealth Group** (NYSE: UNH), the nation's largest insurance company, and is powered by an online platform by American Well, a Boston-based health technology company.

OptumHealth plans to introduce the service state-by-state to both insured and uninsured patients, starting in Texas.

The idea is simple: For \$45, Texas patients can be seen in a 10-minute video consultation with physicians by visiting NowClinic.com. During the virtual medical appointment, doctors can treat, diagnose and prescribe medications to patients for minor and more routine medical conditions, such as colds, coughs, urinary tract infections, and the like.

"This new online method of care is just another way we hope to make it better for our patients," said Dr. Matt Weyenberg, a family physician at Village Health Partners.

"It's an opportunity for physicians to interact with patients in a new-world fashion," added Dr. Larry Tatum, a obstetrician/gynecologist and CEO of Texas Health Care.

Pros and cons

Village Health already has a well-established online system for its patients to make requests for appointments and look at laboratory work results. Also, for a \$50 annual fee, it has an unlimited e-mail service that allows patients to contact their physician for consultation via e-mail.

“So we thought that (NowClinic) was a great way to extend even more what we were already doing for our patients online,” Weyenberg said.

The Texas Medical Board made a determination last month that the Internet video chat technology could be used only to see patients whom physicians already had seen in-house, said Leigh Hopper, a Texas Medical Board spokeswoman.

For that reason, both Village Health Partners’ nine family practice physicians, and Texas Health Care, a multispecialty physicians group of 130 members, only plan to see existing patients using NowClinic.

And Texas Health Care is letting only its family practice physicians and obstetrician/gynecologists participate in NowClinic, if they so choose, Tatum said.

Advocates of NowClinic believe it holds the promise of helping to offset a shortage of primary care physicians and open up access to medical care for insured and uninsured patients by making a doctor’s visit more convenient and affordable to all. But skeptics say physicians who see patients via video chat are running a risk by treating patients without the benefit of live physical exams, and video access for the uninsured is likely to be limited since the service is available only to existing patients.

But some say there’s a middle ground between the two sides.

“Obviously, there will be some cases when you do need to come into a doctor’s office or you may have to go the emergency room,” Weyenberg said. “And it’s important that patients realize that it’s not like you’ll never come in again to a doctor’s office.”

For instance, the 10-minute consultation doesn’t guarantee a diagnosis or a prescription.

And there will be a learning curve on how best to use the new technology. But appointments that involve the patient seeking common prescription refills could be treated simply and easily using video chat online.

This month, Weyenberg has chosen a couple of patients to consult using NowClinic. He plans to talk to an existing patient about the possibility of doing a modification on her antidepressant medication. He also plans to see another patient who recently lost his job and accompanying health insurance who wants to be seen for a follow-up appointment on his migraine headaches. Having recently lost his insurance, that patient is more likely to use

the service — rather than go into a doctor’s office — since he can be seen for a flat fee of \$45, Weyenberg said.

This financial model for delivering medical care works because physicians can charge patients a lot less since there’s none of the overhead costs of running a medical office, and it extends the time that doctors can see patients outside of typical business hours. It also could attract new patients who are looking for convenient and cost-effective ways to receive care.

The Texas market

NowClinic is similar in concept to telemedicine, which has been in use in rural areas for some time. Telemedicine is a real-time consultation using video conference technology that involves a family practice physician and a specialist, while the patient is also present, as both doctors discuss his or her case. But in the case of NowClinic, the physician and patient would directly interact by teleconference online without another physician on hand, Weyenberg said.

NowClinic is being launched in Texas because of the challenges the state has in accessing health care, said OptumHealth CEO Rob Webb, in a statement.

With about 25% of its residents lacking health insurance, Texas has the highest percentage of uninsured residents in the nation. It also has the highest rural population in the United States, and 55% of Texas counties do not have pediatricians.

It’s important to emphasize to patients, though, that the new service should not be about “cutting corners in health care,” Weyenberg said. But rather, in specific cases, “this is a method that is more efficient on everyone’s time and on their pocketbooks.”

Chatting up a storm

Pros:

- Can be used by uninsured and insured Texas residents
- Costs just \$45 for a 10-minute consultation
- It is easily accessed and allows patients with computers to stay in comfort of their on homes
- Can be used to get routine medical care, such as treatment for coughs, flus, urinary tract infections and refilling prescriptions
- Can be used to see patients in rural areas or other areas with limited access to health care

Cons:

- In Texas, only patients that have been previously seen in-office by physicians offering NowClinic Can use the service
- It cannot be used for serious, urgent or chronic conditions that require higher-level care or diagnosis
- Cannot be used for conditions that require a physical examination
- May require a follow-up, in-office appointment