



Racing Toward

THE *New Normal*

COVID-19 triggers catch-up moment at Scripps Health

By Julia Garbee, Karen Patel, RN, M.S.N., and Anil N. Keswani, M.D.

Rarely does an event come along that creates a seismic shift in an industry. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented disruption in healthcare systems worldwide.

By the end of 2020, Scripps Health, a leading not-for-profit healthcare organization, underwent a rapid systematic transformation. Our healthcare system treated over 9,000 patients with COVID-19 in acute and ambulatory settings combined. Learning and treating a new illness, prioritizing infection control, and maintaining critical

healthcare services triggered a “new normal” in our care delivery and management.

The focal point of change was the replacement of face-to-face visits with virtual visits. The unforeseen pandemic stoked a technological revolution driven by demand for virtual visits.

Chris Van Gorder, president and CEO of Scripps Health, believes that “we will never go back to the old way of seeing and treating patients.” McKinsey results agree. Studies reveal that 50% of users intend to continue using telehealth for clinical assessment and treatment

recommendations post-COVID-19, and 53% anticipate using it for mental health treatment.¹

We also expanded virtual and digital transformation beyond patient care. In response to social distancing standards and COVID-19’s extraordinary challenges, Scripps implemented policies and technologies to support organization-wide remote communication with tools such as Microsoft Teams for employees. Meetings shifted from formal boardrooms to informal home settings. All this transformed our healthcare paradigm.

Figure 1

Expanding Telehealth Technical Capabilities

Critical for Future Success

“MyScripps”

“MyScripps,” powered by Epic®, is a portal for patients to schedule appointments, receive test results, and access billing information, among other capabilities. There are over 415,000 patients registered on the “MyScripps” app. Some of the key functions have proved instrumental in delivering care in a COVID-19 world.

E-Visits

An asynchronous messaging system that allows patients to securely “text” physicians, who are equipped with the ability to prescribe medications to patients if necessary.

Symptom Checker

A function that prompts patients with a series of questions to narrow in on their symptoms to generate a recommendation of next steps based on the patient’s responses and chart information.

Expanded Beyond COVID

Mail Order Pharmacy

Both a measure for infection control and an intervention for medication adherence, Mail Order Pharmacy delivers medication straight to a patient’s doorstep. Patients receive their medication on a regular schedule, circumventing the potential risk of exposure at crowded pharmacies.

Continuous Glucose Monitor (CGM)

A compact device that attaches to a patient’s abdomen or arm and can transmit accurate blood sugar measurements to a nursing station. Using a CGM reduced unnecessary contact and finger stick between a nurse and patient. This technology economized scarce personal protective equipment (PPE), increased quality, and reduced risk of exposure to COVID-19. Scripps had been testing CGM in a randomized control trial for years, finding that CGM devices can save hospitalized patients the pain of hourly finger pricks and save up to \$226 per patient per year, in addition to reducing the use of PPE. Athena Philis-Tsimikas, M.D., corporate vice president for the Scripps Whittier Diabetes Institute, believes that CGM may prove to be a reliable, high-quality, efficient tool for managing hospitalized diabetics.

COVID Specific

Zoom™ in Hospital

Scripps’ hospitals can connect COVID-19 patients to their families using Zoom™ on iPads.

COVID-19 Care Companion (CCC)

This is an opt-in, longitudinal care system, reaching over 2,000 COVID-19 patients via daily check-ins. The unprecedented support this initiative provides to non-admitted patients is ideal not only for COVID-19 patients, but patients with other conditions as well. Scripps will continue to use this framework with patients after COVID-19.

Beyond Virtual Visits

We are actively modernizing the traditional definition of telehealth beyond virtual visits. Telehealth encompasses a wide range of technological capabilities that promote patient access to care while ensuring protocol adherence. While leveraging technology to accommodate social distancing, providers are learning that these tools streamline their

workflows, and patients are forming tech-friendly health habits. Rather than focusing just on telehealth as a new access point, Scripps leveraged technology to provide a seamless digital patient journey. While some of this work was built to combat COVID, we implemented and accelerated many innovative processes to improve care for all patients in the future (see Figure 1).

Compassion and Technology

The pandemic reshaped demand across Scripps Health. As emergency rooms were reaching capacity with COVID-19 patients, non-emergent departments were closing their doors, leaving their providers temporarily unable to provide care. To optimize its response to this crisis, Scripps

Video Visits

Video visits are accessible via “MyScripps,” which connects to VidoConnect software. Patients can access care via video on their own schedule, some even calling from a car or a walk, avoiding waiting rooms and long drives to facilities. Scripps has conducted over 250,000 video visits. Providers at Scripps have discovered that video visits are extremely well-suited to diabetes checkups, clinical consults, follow-up appointments, and neurology visits.

One-Click Scheduling

A tool that allows providers to schedule appointments with patients without pre-approval for timing, striving to accommodate the schedules of both patients and providers.

Remote Patient Monitoring (RPM)

COVID-19 patients who were discharged from the hospital were able to be monitored by clinicians using devices, like an Apple Watch, to transmit a patient’s health measurements to clinicians. The goal was to increase patient engagement with their health and improve clinical outcomes efficiently. Scripps will expand the tremendous success of this program to reach more patients.

E-Advanced Care Planning

Scripps introduced a program that, according to Susan Erikson, “offers patients and their families a more thorough approach to time-pressed conversations.” With the onset of COVID-19, Scripps worked with physicians to identify potential candidates who did not have an advanced care plan documented and had a high predicted risk. Patients agreeing to participate would schedule video visits with the support of physicians and family members that would be recorded and stored in the cloud for later use. Over 200 patients enrolled in the program. Based upon very strong positive feedback from those who elected to participate, Scripps plans to continue to offer this program after COVID-19.

Hello Patient

A geolocating tool that gives patients the option to wait in their car instead of the waiting room, minimizing their risk of exposure to COVID-19.

COVID Triage Line

A phone line operated by licensed nurses who triage patients suspected to have COVID-19 to e-visits, video visits, or to a visit with an appropriate facility based on their symptoms. COVID-19 triage averages at 1,100 call/week.

quickly trained employees to work in various COVID-19 response sectors that spoke to their backgrounds. We created a COVID Care Companion team consisting of five clinic nurses retrained for outreach to patients who tested positive and were symptomatic.

Initially, the COVID Care Companion nurses instructed patients to enter their symptoms daily through



The MyScripps portal, powered by Epic® technology, allows patients to schedule appointments, receive test results, and access billing information in one place.

In the early days of the pandemic, Scripps compressed a two-year rollout plan for telehealth into five days. Since then, video visits have proven their equivalency relative to in-person visits, with 90% of patients not requiring additional in-person visits.



“The initial flood of tens of thousands of desperately anxious patient questions generated an urgency to create a predictable virtual venue for our clinicians to address questions, issues, and concerns in a regular fashion. As healthcare experts, it is our duty to our community to do what we can to be a trusted source of authentic medical truths.”

—Kevin Hirsch, M.D., President and CEO, Scripps Coastal Medical Group



the Epic®-powered “MyScripps” portal, which alerts nurses to abnormalities. The team quickly learned that many patients faced technological barriers to using MyChart. They focused on calling patients daily as a longitudinal resource to COVID-19 patients. The team continues to improve in their care delivery and efficiency.

Nurse Heroes

Charlotte Thomas, a Scripps nurse practitioner and Army veteran, describes her 10-hour shifts in the COVID-19 ICU as more stressful than her 10 years as an Army nurse. The process of donning Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) prior to entering rooms and then properly removing it when exiting adds time to caring for patients. This forced a rapid transformation of the ICU workflow with frequent shifts and heightened infection control precautions.

The physical stress nurses endure from standing on their

feet all day and sweating through multiple PPE layers compounds the inescapable emotional strain from caring for patients. COVID-19 restrictions made connecting patients with their loved ones an entirely new struggle for the nurses. Before Scripps started using Zoom™ to call patients’ families, Thomas would put her personal cellphone in a plastic bag and use smart phone apps to video chat with families, holding the phone up to a patient’s face and walking family members through the functions of each machine in the room.

Nurse Thomas recounted times when patients’ families that were worried about their loved ones would call or text her even when she was not at work. Sometimes, she felt she couldn’t catch a break. COVID-19 was “sapping [her] emotional availability.” The guilt of not being at the hospital was just as straining as the emotional impact from being there.

New Communication Models

COVID-19's disruption to healthcare norms might have a silver lining: efficient and effective technologies for collaborating and communicating. Scripps Health swiftly streamlined communication workflows to simultaneously promote a universal data-driven COVID-19 source of facts while adhering to social distancing regulations. Communication was crucial to aligned teamwork and successful execution.

We swiftly developed innovative capabilities to not only treat patients safely, but also to internally communicate and work effectively in a socially distanced world.

System-wide, Scripps boasts a diversified communications portfolio. Transmitting information across the system keeps everyone up to speed with fast-changing COVID-19 updates. We use many platforms and formats to meet staff where they are in terms of how they would like to receive information.

Successful Technology Deployment

In the initial days of the pandemic, Scripps Health was on a "COVID-19 high," a term Kristy Mendez, senior director of Scripps Population Health, uses to explain the organization-wide unified push to keep patients away from overcrowded, potentially infectious settings. Scripps compressed a two-year rollout plan for telehealth into five days and identified and preemptively telephonically checked on 6,300 patients with high-risk medical conditions.

Scripps shifted into virtual care to meet patients "where they are," diverting mild cases of COVID-19 from hospitals and limiting exposure of non-COVID-19 patients

1 Virtual Rounding. Every day at 12:15 PM, Kevin Hirsch, M.D., president and CEO of Scripps Coastal Medical Group, and Anthony Chong, M.D., chief medical officer at Scripps Coastal Medical Center, lead virtual rounding for their medical group—a forum where clinicians collect and distribute at-the-moment COVID-19 information throughout the Scripps community. There, they take an objective look at COVID-19 data, providing staff with an expert interpretation of top national projections from Johns Hopkins University and The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington, in addition to Scripps' own President's Dashboard and local news sources.

They also highlight recent Scripps initiatives and identify optimal infection control policies for staff to emulate. The call ends with both doctors discussing questions that staff type into the chat box during the call. Virtual Rounding allows Scripps Coastal to fight COVID-19 with a unified front. Up to 150 clinicians tune in to the highly informative update to advocate for their patients amidst the pandemic's constantly changing news and unanswered questions.

Those who cannot attend are provided with a bulleted summary of the meeting's key points. Virtual Rounding provides a means to rapidly dispense critical information to the Scripps team, allowing for consistent and optimal treatment of COVID-19 despite the dynamically changing nature of virus facts.

and providers. Patients became quick adopters of telehealth, with a 96% patient satisfaction score. Leveraging the capabilities of existing technologies such as the Epic® framework and devices most people have in their homes, Scripps managed a speedy transition to telehealth while providing high-quality and collaborative care.

"This significant change could not have happened without collaboration with our physician partners," according to Melody Stewart, vice president, Medical Group Operations at Scripps Clinic, a multispecialty group with over 800 providers. And it is proving to be successful. Video visits are proving their equivalency to in-person visits, with 90% of patients not

requiring additional in-person visits. Scripps had planned a gradual implementation of telehealth to align with California Assembly Bill No. 744.² This bill would have required health plans to treat video visits identically to in-person visits by January 2021. To mitigate the spread of COVID-19, however, the state and payers made an interim decision to allow equal treatment during the pandemic. Last March, Scripps dramatically shifted its rollout plan, strategizing for the rapid spread of telehealth with payer support.

For providers who already used this infrastructure, acclimating to a virtual world was smooth. Training was required in the early stages, but necessity and practice



2 President's Dashboard.

This dashboard of COVID-19 data, created using unprecedented collaboration across Scripps, allows leadership to understand information and trends about Scripps patients, hospitals, resources, and more. COVID-19 created an extraordinary demand for rapid data transparency. Scripps responded with this dashboard, which presents a single source of truths for users to consistently inform the public and make organizational decisions based on these truths.

3 Site Touchpoints with Physicians.

These broad yet concise weekly or biweekly physician-leadership updates maintain organizational consistency.

4 Microsoft Teams.

While non-clinical staff can no longer go to an office, this Microsoft application replaces in-person workflows with virtual workflows. Staff quickly learned to pivot to Microsoft Teams for virtual meetings and collaboration. Microsoft Teams is the primary application our staff use to video chat and message each other.

5 COVID-19 Command Center for Scripps Medical Foundation (SMF).

The COVID-19 Command Center, effectively acting as “mission control,” was developed out of a need to streamline COVID-19 communications across all Scripps facilities. The Scripps Health Command Center is a key operational resource, allocating appropriate resources and staff where they are most needed. Its success is achieved by promoting a unified source of truth. Clinicians send questions to the Command Center team that quickly finds an appropriate expert to answer, then echoes that answer across the organization via alerts. The Command Center caters to staff needs, equipping them with information to support their patients during the pandemic. The Center sends out alerts at a regular cadence and facilitates frequent system-wide calls.

When COVID-19 hit, the need for a SMF Command Center to coordinate initiatives across all Scripps ambulatory facilities was imperative. Tracy Chu, corporate vice president, Population Health, and chief executive, ACO, and Melody Stewart, vice president, Medical Group Operations, developed a governance structure for the SMF Command Center. It works under the direction of the Scripps Health Command Center and expands as needs develop, generating workflows for business continuity and COVID-19 exposure in addition to creating a robust clinical arm.

compressed into five days what would have taken over two years to accomplish. During the week-long conversion of the originally planned telehealth pilot program to a robust, system-wide platform, leadership recognized that “perfect was the enemy, good was the friend,” according to Susan Erikson, assistant vice president of Enterprise Care Management.

Scripps continues to develop their telehealth services, diversifying video formats by appointment type and making the app user-friendly for all patients, including those who are hearing-impaired, visually impaired, and non-English speakers. At first, most patients opted for telephonic visits instead of video, but as providers and patients became competent

users, the ratio shifted to over two-thirds using video.

A Technology-Enhanced Future

COVID-19 caused Scripps to improve the patient experience and digitize the patient journey. In a post-COVID-19 world, virtual health may not be required, but its efficiency and far-reaching capabilities are in our blood. Anya McDonald, director of IS Population Health

at Scripps, stated it best: “Digital health moved from a curiosity tool to an actual clinical standard. Self-servicing through mobile is now part of the future, and it’s here to stay.” [GRJ](#)

Julia Garbee is population health staff intern; Karen Patel, RN, M.S.N., is director, clinical operations, Population Health; and Anil N. Keswani, M.D., is corporate senior vice president, chief medical officer, Ambulatory and Accountable Care, Scripps Health.

References

1. T. Charm, R. Das, A. Grimmelt, et al. 2020. Survey: US Consumer Sentiment During the Coronavirus Crisis. McKinsey & Co. Accessed March 3, 2021 at mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/survey-us-consumer-sentiment-during-the-coronavirus-crisis.
2. *California Legislative Information*. 2019. Assembly Bill No. 744 Health care coverage: Telehealth, October 13, 2019. Accessed March 3, 2021 at leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB744.