



American Telemedicine Association

Telehealth Nursing

**A White Paper Developed and Accepted by the
Telehealth Nursing Special Interest Group**

April 7, 2008

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this white paper is to provide a framework of principles from which policies, procedures, standards and/or guidelines can be generated. The information contained in this document is intended to enlighten and empower nurses and others regarding the field of telehealth nursing and applications of telehealth technologies. The Telehealth Nursing SIG advances telehealth nursing, with the goals of improving patient safety, providing increased access to nursing care, and supporting the health of patients, families, and communities.

DEFINITIONS OF TELEMEDICINE & TELEHEALTH

- Telemedicine or Telehealth is comprised of the use of medical and other health information exchanged via electronic communications from one site to another with the intent of improving the health status of consumers (ATA, 2007).

DEFINITIONS OF TELEHEALTH NURSING

There are several definitions that have been adopted for telehealth nursing. All are similar in their intent:

- Telehealth nursing is the practice of nursing over distance using telecommunications technology (National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), 1997).
- Telehealth nursing is the delivery, management, and coordination of care and services provided via telecommunications technology within the domain of nursing (American Association of Ambulatory Care Nursing (AAACN), 2004).
- Telehealth nursing is the use of telecommunications technology in nursing to enhance patient care. It involves the use of electromagnetic channels (e.g., wire, radio, and optical) to transmit voice, data, and video communications signals. It is defined as distance communications, using electrical or optical transmissions, between humans and/or computers (Skiba, D.J. & Barton, A.J., 2000).

BACKGROUND

The terms “telehealth nursing,” “telenursing,” and “nursing telepractice” have been used interchangeably, and have the same meaning. The terms “home telehealth nursing” and “telehomecare nursing” are examples of two terms having the same meaning to describe telehealth nursing. Both of these terms describe using technology in the homecare setting, in order to deliver nursing care remotely. Some telehealth nurses function as “telepresenters,” working in the same room with patients who are

participating in telehealth consultations with other healthcare providers at a distance. In these situations, a healthcare provider is providing medical, nursing, or other healthcare remotely, but the remote practitioner requires a nurse to be present with the patient to assist in the presentation of the patient. In all areas of telehealth nursing, including all related roles and functions, telehealth nurses are committed to leveraging technology and nursing expertise to provide quality nursing care, to delivering nursing expertise to those who need care, and to improving health and patients' outcomes. It can take place in a healthcare institution, a patient's home, or elsewhere. Telehealth nursing is intended to be broad based (e.g., interstate and international collaboration), with nurses using telehealth technologies to provide care in an interdisciplinary manner, irrespective of geographic and time constraints.

Telehealth nursing is the provision of nursing services by electronic means, and therefore it constitutes the practice of nursing (National Council of State Boards of Nursing Position Paper on Telenursing: A challenge to regulation, August 1997). The body of nursing knowledge and competencies remain constant; it is merely the medium of delivery that is different from traditional nursing care. However, there may be specific competencies required for effective use of various technologies employed. As such, telehealth nursing can take place in most practice settings, and in most specialty areas. Establishing, monitoring, and enforcing competencies for telehealth nursing are the responsibility of individual nurses, employing organizations, and licensing and credentialing agencies. Specific competencies related to telehealth nursing include appropriate, effective, proficient, and safe use of telehealth technologies/medical devices in the practice of nursing at a distance. Administrative teams within individual healthcare organizations are responsible for identifying and verifying telehealth nursing competencies, as related to job function. In addition, required competencies may go beyond skill with equipment and technology. An understanding of technology limitations is needed, as well as an understanding of the knowledge, skills, and judgment necessary to identify, acknowledge, and interpret the changes in the practice arena that a distance factor creates. An understanding of technology limitations is needed, as well as an understanding of the knowledge, skills, and judgment necessary because of the distance factor. Ultimately, adequate knowledge is needed to facilitate decisions about when a patient requires an in-person evaluation. Enhanced communication skills are an integral part of using this medium to deliver healthcare.

Nurses practicing telehealth nursing adhere to existing regulations of the jurisdiction in which they practice, including licensure and regulatory requirements. An awareness of legal and regulatory requirements for the patient setting or location also is needed. Telehealth nurses adhere to the same standards of quality, patient privacy, and confidentiality as established in traditional nursing practice and as governed by law. Specific regulatory and technical standards approval processes (i.e., FDA, UL, or similar approvals) may be required for telehealth/telemedicine equipment, prior to use in practice.

There is a need for standards and guidelines to support telehealth nursing practice and to reduce liability risk for nurses. Practice standards and guidelines are evidence-based, and national nursing and telehealth professional associations drive the development and dissemination of nursing telehealth practice standards. Input from a wide array of constituents is solicited in developing the standards and guidelines, in order to assure adequate consideration of technological, medical, nursing, legal, and ethical issues. The American Telemedicine Association's (ATA) Telenursing SIG is well positioned to take a leadership role in these endeavors, drawing collaboration from other SIGs within the ATA, industry, professional organizations, and others, as appropriate. Likewise, telehealth nurses actively engage in standard and guideline development in other healthcare specialty areas, as nurses are integral to an effective, coordinated healthcare delivery model.

To ensure safe and high quality telehealth nursing practice, technical requirements for privacy and security of personal health data should adhere to local and national laws governing the storage and transmission of personal health information. For example, in the U.S., if telehealth nurses are expected to use electronic communications as part of the telehealth/telemedicine communication process, secure messaging technology and infrastructure are provided in accordance with Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations. These regulations and standards also apply to correspondence by telephone. Such communications are conducted, only after appropriate verification that information is being shared with authorized individuals, via an identifying password or other security substantiation.

Nursing leaders engaged in policy development ensure that telehealth nurses are aware of and actively advocate for legislation that positively impacts telehealth nursing. Telehealth nurses interpret both positive and negative consequences of legislation and regulations under consideration, in order to respond appropriately to bills that would support or impair a nurse's ability to practice at a distance. Maintaining positive working relationships with policymakers may help to facilitate legislation supporting telehealth nursing practice. Similarly, positive relationships with other regulatory bodies, such as NCSBN, JCAHO, CMS, etc., will clarify and support the evolution of telehealth nursing.

TELEHEALTH NURSING CONSIDERATIONS

Opportunities exist to advance the understanding and practice of telehealth nursing, based on commitment by all who support and/or incorporate telehealth technologies and principles into the practice of nursing. Some opportunities include:

- Policy
 - Address areas related to nurse licensure portability, such as the Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC) and other avenues that facilitate interstate practice.

- Establish guidelines and standards for the practice of telehealth nursing.
 - Encourage a broad representation of contributors, both within and outside the discipline, when developing guidelines and standards for telehealth nursing.
 - Actively advocate for legislation that impacts nurses' abilities to deliver safe, effective, and affordable telehealth nursing practice.
- Clinical
 - Provide insights for development and improvement of technologies to meet the needs and demands of the health care providers and consumers.
 - Collaborate with the American Telemedicine Association (ATA), ATA Special Interest Groups (SIGs), and other health care agencies, organizations, and service providers that promote the active role of nurses in telehealth and telemedicine.
 - Participate in development and implementation of competencies necessary for safe and effective delivery of telehealth nursing.
 - Collaborate with developers of information technology systems that ensure privacy and security of health information, while ensuring ease of use and proper information sharing capabilities.
- Administrative
 - Advocate for appropriate levels of technology to ensure effective telehealth nursing practice.
 - Provide adequate training and supervision of clinicians who use technology to deliver health care at a distance.
 - Monitor cost effectiveness and cost/benefit relationships of nursing care delivered via telehealth technologies.
- Education
 - Develop and disseminate accurate information about telehealth nursing to all members of the profession.
 - Educate members of the profession about opportunities to implement technology into practice in order to deliver nursing care to a broader array of clients, removing the barriers of distance and time.
 - Incorporate principles of telehealth nursing practice in the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral curricula of all nursing programs, including information about telecommunications, informatics, information management, interstate licensing and regulations, health information privacy, and methods for delivering nursing care from a distance.

- Research
 - Conduct research and disseminate findings, in order to establish an evidence base for the practice of telehealth nursing.
 - Design and conduct research in initial needs and priority areas identified in the National Agenda for Telenursing Research developed by Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2006).
 - Include impact of telehealth nursing practice on patient, family, society, health care system, and fiscal implications in research designs.

- Ethical/Legal
 - Advocate for safe and effective use of telehealth technology.
 - Serve as well-informed resources for consumers and technology developers for the safe use of technology to meet healthcare needs.
 - Monitor outcomes of care resulting from telehealth nursing practice.
 - Ensure confidentiality and patient privacy in all telehealth encounters.

CONCLUSION

The American Telemedicine Association and its membership in the Telehealth Nursing SIG support the work of nurses in clinical, administrative, educational, and research settings, all of whom play vital roles in advocating for patients receiving health care services via telehealth technologies. Along with nurses, ATA is committed to providing educational resources and expertise to assist in the further development and evolution of telehealth nursing.

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We would like to acknowledge Loretta Schlachta-Fairchild, PhD, RN for her contributions in the early phases of this document. We also would like to thank all the members of the Telenursing SIG, Jordana Bernard, and the other leadership at ATA that provided input in the evolution of this document.