

# VIRTUAL CARE

How virtual care presents great potential for optimizing healthcare quality

With Alf Theodorou



Alf Theodorou is an expert in health care quality, data and value. An ardent advocate of analysis, change and outcomes over outputs, Alf is the founder and CEO of NewCourse, a company dedicated to driving health care quality, data and patient-centered care.

We spoke to him about how he foresees the future of health care, the opportunities virtual care may present and the importance of user engagement when developing new solutions.

## Alf, how do you think the COVID-19 pandemic may impact health care offerings?

The pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on life, certainly beyond comparison with anything that our generation has experienced. People talk about the impact of the war and the financial depression that followed, or the Spanish flu pandemic as the best comparisons. We've been presented with both a challenge and an opportunity.

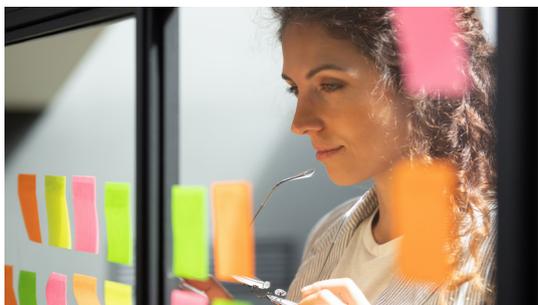
We have all noticed the impact COVID-19 has had on our way of life. Frontline care workers have been systematically exposed to large-scale, sustained stressors. We cannot afford to forget that. Many people are predicting that a significant proportion of the health care workforce is reconsidering their future.

The impact on health care delivery will be driven by two factors: how you help the workforce recover; and how you deal with the backlog and requirements of patients who have had to wait for care. I do not think the traditional "do more, faster" approach will be sustainable; we need to look at other ways to meet demand. Incorporating technologies to enable virtual care, from case management to physician appointments, looking at how artificial intelligence (AI) or machine learning could help manage risk and even breaking down the barriers between public and private organizations are all going to be part of the "new normal".

*"I would always urge people to understand more about the problem they are trying to fix before jumping to the immediate implementation of a specific solution."*

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### **What do you think health care providers should consider when creating virtual solutions?**

As a specialist in quality improvement, I would always urge people to understand more about the problem they are trying to fix before jumping to the immediate implementation of a specific solution. I think that's especially relevant where technology is involved; whether it's a shiny new piece of equipment

or something like an electronic health record system, the principles of quality improvement are important in all change. If you know what is broken in your system, where the wastes, inefficiencies and opportunities are, you will be better positioned to design the optimum solutions to overcome these.

### **How does engagement with users fit in to this process?**

With all solutions, you need to make sure you are engaging with all users, both the clinical teams and the patients, families and carers. Everyone will have a different perspective and varying requirements and ultimately, change is unlikely to be sustainable if your solution neglects to look at one of those user sets. For example, while telehealth solutions might enable hospitals to reduce demand at the front door and see more patients, you have to consider whether patients have access to the technology required or whether their specific communication needs can be met with this alternative.

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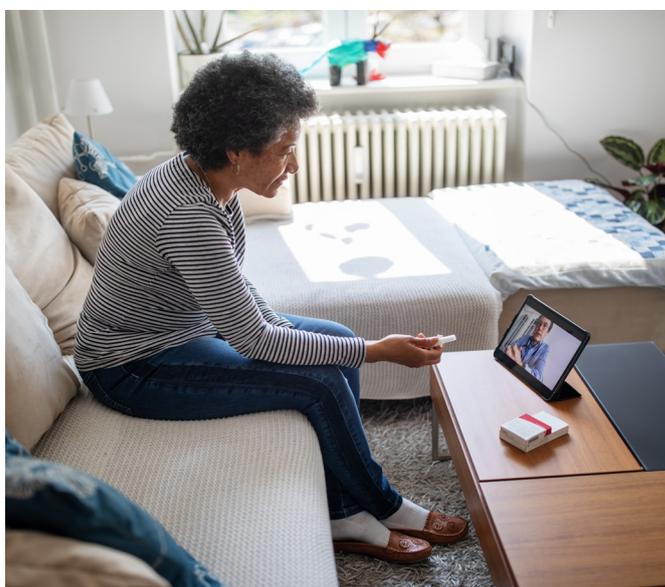
### **How would you recommend that organizations best engage users in any changes they plan?**

Get them involved right from the beginning. Ask them to articulate the problems with the existing process and discuss the opportunities to do things differently. In health care, we are realizing the importance of

patient engagement in all activities but I would not say that this is common practice everywhere. Health care managers and leaders need to make sure that they engage clinicians too. Much of the resistance we see can be overcome if we engage people early.

### **Do you think virtual care offers more opportunity for creativity in the health care industry?**

Yes, for the simple reason that it offers the opportunity to consider the delivery of health care outside of the traditional four-walled hospital setting. We need to challenge ourselves to think differently, and one way to do that is to see what we can learn from other industries. I remember a great story once about an improvement project looking at the delivering of flu vaccines. The biggest challenge for the patients was finding somewhere to park. An appointment that



should have taken less than a couple of minutes was taking hours by the time parking, walking and waiting had been factored in. The improvement team asked what lessons could be learned from the fast-food industry and, to much laughter, someone suggested a drive thru flu clinic. That's the solution they implemented in the end, with patients driving up to a building, having the flu shot and then driving off. Compliance in the community went through the roof.

### **That's a great example of thinking outside the health care box. When new initiatives are implemented, how can health care providers measure the success of any new services or products they offer?**

This comes back to understanding what they are trying to improve from the outset and setting clear measures of success that are easy to collect. Say for example that the issue is a long waiting list to see a provider; a success measure would be more people getting access in a shorter time.

Without this becoming a lecture in data... when we're determining success, we should consider three elements; process, outcome and consequence. In a telehealth solution, the quality of the process could be measured by successful calls completed with patients; the outcome could be fewer patients readmitted to hospital or requiring in-hospital follow up. Then, simultaneously, we would assess consequence; we want to check that we have not misdiagnosed anyone, through managing the consultation differently, and make sure that patients were not dissatisfied with service because it felt impersonal.

***“Technology gives us the opportunity to improve the consistency, accuracy, and analysis of the information we hold.”***

### **What do you think the health care world will see over the next few years?**

I would like to see us changing the way we access care. I think it is important that we evaluate whether we need to be in a hospital, for example, or whether we can be better managed, diagnosed and treated elsewhere.

There will be more integration of technology for sure. We've been seeing advances in equipment that offer improved detection of disease and treatment with fewer side effects, and virtual care will allow us to better self-monitor and seek clinical input from the comfort of our own homes. Alongside that, I think we'll see development of holistic care needs; a much greater understanding of the importance of involving patients and families in choices about care. This could be anything from treatment settings, to scheduling treatment regimens and understanding the mental health impact of poor health on patients and careers. And there's potential for personalized medicine, using genetic analysis to facilitate more targeted prevention and management of conditions.

And of course there's data - striving for one version of the truth, incorporating accessible AI into decision-making and risk management and then actually measuring outcome and not output. That's something we've talked about for years but haven't come to grips with globally yet.

### **Does the development of technologies have the potential to better facilitate data collection?**

In a long list of the biggest issues in health care, data is a real challenge. We know there are huge opportunities to do more with the data we collect, for anything from personalized treatment and risk management to knowing where the best place for a patient to be treated is. Technology gives us the opportunity to improve the consistency, accuracy and analysis of the information we hold.



We do need to look at how we move to one single version of the truth and overcome the issue of human data input, which drives lots of errors. We need to make sure that when someone accesses care in a number of different places, their information is brought together so that in each instance, the person looking after them is in possession of all the facts they need. That, in my mind, is the ultimate goal.

Written by: **Cigna Wellbeing**

With special thanks to:



**Alf Theodorou**, founder and CEO of NewCourse. He partners with Cigna to support quality and value initiatives.

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