The Doctor is Online

Approximately one in five adults in the United States (U.S.)—43.8 million people—experience mental illness in a given year; and about 9.8 million of those experience a serious mental illness that substantially interferes with or limits their life activities. Among the 20 million adults in the U.S. who have a substance use disorder, such as opioid addiction, over 50 percent—10.2 million adults—have a co-occurring mental illness. A mere 41 percent of the 43.8 million adults in the U.S. who experienced a mental health condition last year received mental health services, that left over 25 million people untreated.

Mental illnesses and substance use disorders can have debilitating effects. Many people’s condition is so severe that they cannot get out of bed or leave their home to seek treatment. It is estimated that serious mental illness costs America $193.2 billion in lost earnings per year alone. Exacerbating the problem is that access to mental health care is worse than any other type of medical service. People who live in high density, congested urban areas are faced with long commute times to seek a mental health counselor while others who live in rural areas have limited or no treatment facilities within hundreds of miles. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated in 2014 that the U.S. had 168,200 practicing mental health counselors, which equates to a national shortage of service providers.

One potential solution to the lack of behavioral health care access and workforce shortage problem in the U.S. is an emerging area of treatment called telebehavioral health. Telebehavioral health is a service delivery method that broadens the availability of access to quality care across all behavioral health areas. Using video conferencing technology, telebehavioral health services allow real-time visits with a behavioral health specialist, who is physically in another location that can assist in the evaluation, diagnosis, management, and treatment of mental health and substance use disorder problems. Telehealth services have been proven to drive important treatment advancements for patients, expand access to care, improve health outcomes, and cut costs. Given that approximately 20 percent of the adult population in the United States is reported to have a mental illness, and the fact that there is a growing shortage of behavioral health providers to respond to this significant need for service, the expansion of telehealth is critical.
Addressing the workforce shortage and boosting the number of mental health professions in urban and rural areas is key. Nearly all large employers offer virtual doctor visits as an employee benefit. And in 2018, it is estimated that 96 percent of employer based behavioral health benefits will provide access to telehealth services. (The National Business Group on Health Annual Employer Survey 2017). That is up from 90 percent in 2017, 46 percent in 2015 and seven percent in 2012. While the service is available, utilization of telehealth is still low among employees and more needs to be done to educate individuals about the availability and benefits of telehealth.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), most adults, both with mental health symptoms and without, agreed that treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives. But many people with mental health disorders go undiagnosed and untreated due to the stigma associated with seeking treatment. Telebehavioral health services have been proven to assist in overcoming the stigma barrier.

The rising opioid crisis in our country provides even more reason to grant appropriate access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment. Now more than ever, the U.S. government is looking to expand and improve access to telebehavioral health services. The CONNECT for Health Act and the CHRONIC Care Act are just two examples of federal bills that are intended to promote access to behavioral health services and ensure additional telehealth provisions in future legislation in an effort to provide evidence-based quality telebehavioral health care to our most vulnerable citizens and in need communities.

ABHW supports the use of telebehavioral health where appropriate and advocates for the lifting of barriers that prevents its advancement and use.