Exploring the Future of Telehealth

I'm putting together a white paper exploring the future of telehealth. It's an interesting proposition, because as far as I can determine from preliminary research, nobody knows where the discipline is heading. I guess that shouldn't be surprising, because when I look back at the trends and attitudes when I first became associated with telehealth, nobody would have been able to predict the scene we see today.

Back in the olden days, telehealth was a pretty cut-and-dried project. Most telehealth was done across huge networks using extremely expensive equipment with proprietary communication protocols. That meant that one hospital or medical school would be the center 'hub' of a wheel made up of 'spokes' going out to dozens (hopefully) of small hospitals or clinics in need of sub-specialty care for their patients. That was the model and it lasted for quite a while (and was expected to last forever).

However, today we're seeing things differently. While the majority of telehealth systems are still hub-and-spoke networks, things have changed pretty radically with that design. Now all the equipment manufacturers have agreed on a common videoconferencing protocol so that today equipment from one manufacturer can seamlessly interface with another manufacturer's gear. And while in the past the connections pretty much had to be on dedicated telephone lines, today, the connections are often through a cloud-based server using the commodity Internet. Unheard of back in the day!

We're even seeing the hub-and-spoke paradigm going away. Today there are several care provider businesses that a patient can simply log in to, pay a fee and see a primary care doctor in a couple minutes. There has been some concern about licensing and prescribing with these 'call-in' clinics, but those are being worked through as demand for immediate care grows.

Those changes are significant, and in only ten years. One can only imagine what telehealth will look like in another ten years!