How to create a best-in-class virtual healthcare patient experience

Virtual healthcare should solve many of today's care challenges—but does it?

Creating the best care experience for patients is one of the primary goals in healthcare today. But challenges like provider burnout, hospital closings, and contagious viruses on the loose can limit the actual act of providing in-person care.

As a result, the use of virtual healthcare has spiked in 2021. According to JD Power's 2021 U.S. Telehealth Satisfaction Study, "36% of patients have accessed telehealth services during the past year, up from just 9% in 2020 and 7% in 2019. The top reasons for telehealth utilization are convenience (57%); ability to receive care quickly (47%); and safety (36%)."

When virtual care works the way it's supposed to, it can improve access to care, reduce readmission rates, and shorten hospital stays. It can reserve emergency department use for only the most acute cases. Virtual care enables providers to spend more time providing quality care to their patients, which also supports healthcare organizations as they shift to a value-based care model.

Yet sometimes the very technology utilized to make virtual healthcare do what it's designed to do gets in the way. It becomes impersonal, cumbersome, and needlessly time-consuming. As a result, the people who would most benefit from virtual care don't use it, which annihilates any return on investment.

The best virtual healthcare is personal and engaging, just like a successful in-person visit. It adapts to where the patient is in their health encounter without adding extra work for the provider. It helps health plans capture incremental revenue. Most importantly, it gives patients better options to access care: wherever they are, and from any device.

Let's explore the challenges and opportunities virtual healthcare offers, and a step-by-step blueprint to developing your own virtual care plan that works the way you work.

A "one-size-fits-all" approach to virtual healthcare excludes 20-30% of patients.

Designing a best-in-class virtual care experience requires more than swapping an in-person appointment with a video chat, or relying on a patient to download a new app. But most virtual care solutions offer this type of one-size-fits-all approach. Healthcare organizations are forced to choose: offer limited virtual care that is less adaptable to patients' and providers' needs, or spend millions of dollars and several months of development time creating a custom solution.

To make matters worse, the very patients who would benefit the most from virtual care can't use it:

- **Lower-income patients** don't always have access to the technology they need to access common virtual solutions: a smartphone, a computer, high-speed data, or reliable internet access.

- **People experiencing homelessness** may not have a consistent way for a social worker or care provider to reach them on a lower-tech option.

- **Rural patients** can have spotty mobile service and litmited high-speed internet access at home, making it hard to complete a virtual call in private.

- **Senior patients**, although more tech-savvy than ever, are not always comfortable navigating new technology.

- **Non-English speakers** don't always have on-screen translations or interpreters available when they need them.

The J.D. Power study on telehealth satisfaction addresses these issues as well:

"It's impossible to ignore that 36% of the healthcare customers we measure within our research have used telehealth services this year—which is four times higher than a year ago," said James Beem, managing director of global healthcare intelligence at J.D. Power.

"However, digging deeper into the research, it's clear that customer satisfaction has declined during the same period, with many users citing limited access to the services they need and inconsistencies in the care they receive. As the industry grows, it is critical to address these challenges."

It's not just the patients who are affected by cumbersome or ineffective telehealth solutions.

- **Providers** don't want to add even more mouse clicks to their days or learn to chart in another app. They're frustrated by time-consuming technology that gets in the way of good care.

- **Plans** leak patients to online telemedicine competitors, especially if they make the virtual care experience more convenient for the patient.

- **IT staff** burn out on yet another integration to create and support, with no guarantee of its effectiveness despite its high price tag.

Bluestream Health Spotlight: Heritage Valley Health System

Heritage Valley Health System is an Integrated Delivery Network with more than 600 physicians. They've built a reputation for patient engagement by giving patients more control over their healthcare experience.

"Patients couldn't come to us, so we wanted to come to them, to meet them where they are," Mark Freed, Integration Manager at HVHS explains. "And our providers wanted an easy way—essentially a one-button-click—to launch from their EHR into a telehealth visit with their patient."

This one-click solution solved the problem of patients being unable to come to in-person appointments while also solving another significant problem facing many healthcare settings: limited staffing. Now, providers from across the Heritage Valley delivery network can be logged in from anywhere to easily connect with patients.

Better yet, the solution is so easy to use that it has enjoyed a 100% adoption rate from the providers, and HVHS will expand virtual care services to Behavioral Health.

No one wants impersonal or glitchy virtual care

Technology that gets in the way of fostering an engaging connection misses the point. If the virtual care experience isn't designed for an adaptable, patient-centric approach, then even the most tech-savvy patients and providers will hesitate to use it.

- Downloading an app to connect is an extra hurdle most want to avoid.

- Reconnecting after a dropped call or other interruption is a pain and feels like poor customer service.

- Video calls use different links each time. Because those links are only good for the time of the call, patients who miss their appointments struggle to rebook.

Let's get to the good news: virtual healthcare doesn't need to be this way. It should adapt to wherever and however the patient engages in care. It should be straightforward, as simple as picking up a phone or tapping a "connect now" button.

Virtual healthcare can be inclusive and convenient, even affordable. Here's how.

Bluestream Health Spotlight: Referwell

ReferWell drives efficient care transitions, automating the process for patients to get from a primary doctor referral to booking a specialist appointment at the point of care. Their virtual solution integrates directly into the provider's workflow, regardless of which EMR is used, and makes it easier to schedule visits with providers, whether they are face-to-face or virtual.

Using ReferWell, doctors can better facilitate virtual and in-person visits, stay in touch with the patient, and get data back into the patient chart with very few clicks. By removing the logistical barriers of care, ReferWell gives more people access to frictionless care and helps providers receive incremental revenue.

ReferWell cuts the amount of time it takes for a patient to see a provider by 29% when the televideo and in-person scheduling capabilities are bundled together.

The key to good virtual healthcare: a patient-centric experience.

Recent studies show that patients are taking a more consumer-driven approach to healthcare. They are choosing to receive care at places that offer convenience, boast strong ratings and reviews, and provide the best value and cost transparency.

"As patients have continued to morph into health consumers, they expect more digital access and convenience from their health care touchpoints and experiences," Jane Sarasohn-Kahn, MA, MHSA, health economist, explains.

A best-in-class virtual healthcare solution meets the needs of the patient, the provider and the plan.

It will:

- **Improve patient access and satisfaction** when patients can access care on-demand, using any device, anywhere, anytime;

- **Reduce readmissions** by helping patients stay connected with clinicians for follow-up care from the comfort of their home;

- **Improve provider adoption** when it's easy to use and customizable to existing workflows;

- **Improve staff retention** by ensuring more clinicians work to the top of their license;

- **Increase revenue** by creating efficiencies, eliminating unnecessary tasks, and keeping patients in-network.

Bluestream Health Spotlight: NYC Health + Hospital

The largest public health system in the US, NYC H+H offers on-demand telemedicine and on-demand care to their patients and all the residents of New York City. NYC H+H blends in-person care and virtual care, integrating complex workflows customized to the patient's entry point of care.

Erfan Karim, Executive Director of Express Care at NYC H+H, explains: "The pandemic presented us with new challenges for access to care, but also gave us opportunities to think about what blended digital and in-person care could look like. It all revolves around the patient experience. The patient is put in the center of healthcare, so how do we meet their needs? And how do we give them the best experience possible?"

By bringing care closer to home, NYC H+H helps keep patients out of the emergency department as the default location for care. Emergency physicians can connect virtually with a patient and only bring them in-person appointments as needed.

Patient-centric features to look for in a virtual healthcare service:

- Personalized URL or landing page that guides their care encounter

- On-screen translation and other ADA compliance tools

- Tech-check before the call begins

Provider-friendly features to consider:

- Auto-reconnect to ensure a successful encounter despite interruptions

- Messaging feature for asynchronous communication with the patient

- Ability to add other providers, specialists, or family members to the call

Plans, delivery networks, and healthcare organizations should require their virtual healthcare services to:

- Customize the virtual front door to have the lowest attrition rate possible

- Include a provisioning engine and credentialing capabilities to make better use of providers across the network

- Include a survey module to capture patient feedback and reporting

Essentially, good virtual care replicates what people do. It works behind the scenes to guide patients through their care encounters, keeping everyone apprised of where they should be and when. It helps with scheduling. And it keeps the focus on giving the patient the appropriate level of care at the right time.

It's harder than it looks for software to do this, but it's not impossible. Bluestream Health's Care Navigator is one example of a virtual care solution that can be customized without disrupting anyone's workflows. Using Care Navigator, health systems create unique, adaptive experiences for their patients while giving clinicians more control during and after the virtual call.

Developing a patient-centric solution like Care Navigator for your clinic or hospital can be accomplished in six steps. Depending on the level of integration and complexity, it can go live in as few as six to eight weeks.
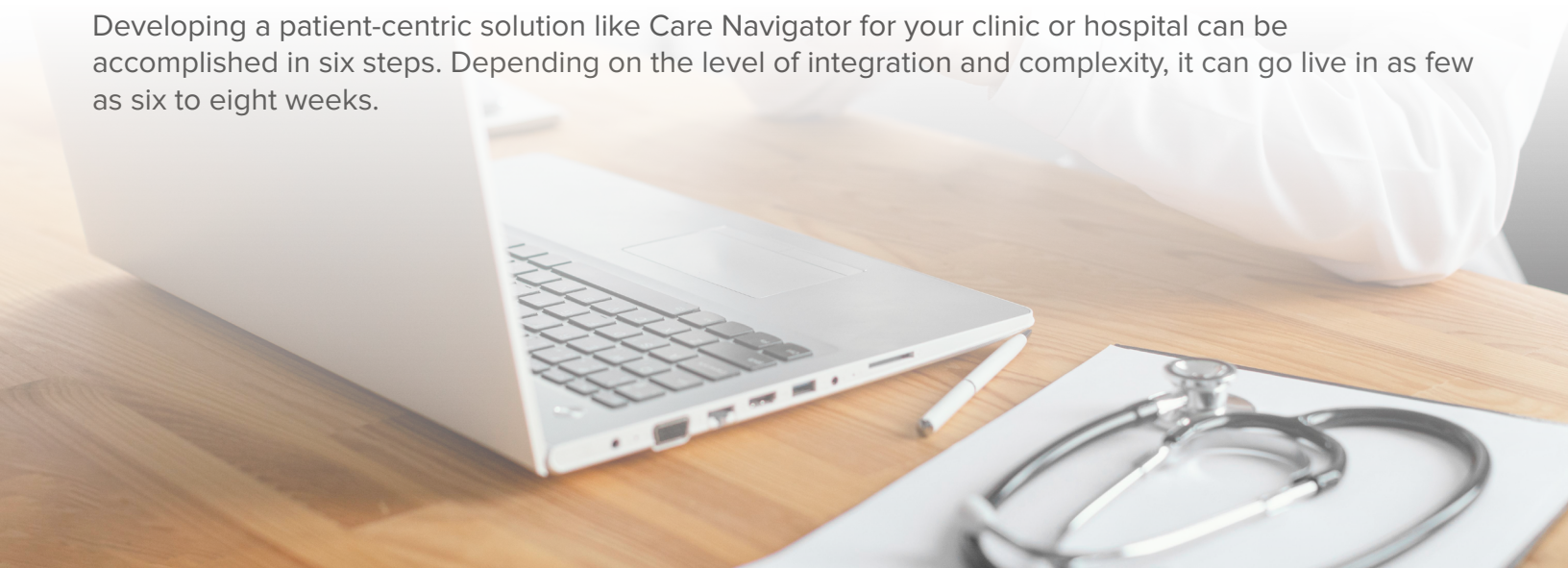
How to Create a Best-in-Class Patient Experience in Virtual Healthcare in Six Steps

Step 1: Understand your patients
Of course, to have a patient-centric virtual solution, you need to start with your patients. Here are some questions to get you started:

- What is your typical patient like? What is their age, gender, the reason for seeking care, common co-morbidities, current access to care, comfort with and access to technology, access to broadband?

- Is there a patient group you would like to expand your services to reach?

- Which patients will provide the most ROI for a virtual care solution?

- How do you anticipate patients will want to access virtual care?

- How might a patient want to experience their telehealth encounters?

Soliciting insight from a consumer experience specialist will further help you understand the patient journey.

Step 2: Evaluate the total cost of ownership
As with any new venture, it's important to do your due diligence. Consider these expenses as you develop your virtual healthcare solution:

- Virtual care platform
  - cost to acquire the platform
  - EHR/EMR integration charges or "trespass fees"
  - ongoing SaaS fees

- Technology:
  - hardware upgrades, such as additional monitors, webcams, tablets
  - telecommunication upgrades

- Support & IT
  - additional time needed by IT department to implement upgrades, integrations
  - ongoing support and training

- Clinical Staffing & Coverage
  - nurses, physicians, and other clinicians
  - consider whether to provide 24/7 coverage or something else

Whether you need a fully EHR-integrated virtual care experience, a simple on-demand option for patients, or something in between, your greatest cost will not be your technology. The real cost is providing 24/7 access to your physicians. Make sure the doctors you're paying will have the volume to justify this expense.

Step 3: Select use cases to start

Because of the high cost of staffing your virtual healthcare solution, it's important to uncover quick wins that will generate revenue right away. Look for ways you can optimize your current financial models. One possibility is offering virtual ambulatory visits that can help pay for other more nuanced virtual care. Finally, think about how to build a value-based care model moving forward.

Use cases could include:

- On-demand primary care through a patient-facing website or patient EHR portal.
  Example: Heritage Valley, MedStar

- Urgent care on demand, where the patient can access the Emergency Department through multiple pathways.
  Example: 9-1-1 integration, ET3, kiosks in homeless shelters

- On-site, Emergency access to resources that aren't on-site, such as telepsychiatry.
  Example: QLER, who connects EDs with credentialed psychiatrists on demand.

Step 4: Get the right team in place

Bring together the people who will be most affected by your virtual healthcare solution. Early representation from each of these teams is crucial to faster and more widespread adoption.

- **Clinical**: Your solution should enable providers to work at the top of their license. Include the perspective of physicians, specialists, and nurses who will engage with the tech and the patients.

- **Consumer (patient) Engagement and Experience**: Staff who are in tune with customer engagement and the customer experience are essential. Their input will be valuable when customizing the user interface and the patient's flow through the virtual encounter.

- **Data Analytics**: Be able to measure the success of your virtual front door, where the most patients engage the service, and where or why patients may drop off.

- **Technical**: IT will work behind the scenes to make the connections and integrations happen smoothly with your virtual care partner.

- **Project Manager**: Keep the team in sight of the ultimate goal—improved patient care and engagement.

Step 5: Select a technology partner who can adapt with you

Being trapped in a one-size-fits-all solution will only frustrate your IT and clinical staff and hurt patient engagement. Don't waste time trying to adjust your workflows to technology—choose a technical solution that adjusts with you.

Look for:

- **Open APIs**: so you can embed virtual care throughout all points of care.

- **Flexibility**: so you can adapt your care model and grow from simple to complex use cases as your needs evolve.

- **Non-competing**: so you aren't vertically integrated out of existence when they also provide virtual care with their own doctors.

- **Multiple Modalities**: so you can engage patients where they are and how they want to be involved

Step 6: Measure results

Finally, make a plan to measure the results of your virtual care solution, to determine where you can make adjustments to better meet the needs of your staff and patients.

Look at:

- **Net promoter scores**: Healthcare is becoming more like a consumer experience. Patients regularly ask for reviews and recommendations from their friends and family, especially when they need to make a switch in health plans. A high net promoter score will drive the next two buckets of results, provider utilization and patient engagement.

- **Provider utilization**: Do you have the right mix of physicians, clinicians and support staff available? Are they using their available time efficiently? Are enough calls coming in to justify the expense?

- **Patient engagement**: are patients clicking through to virtual care from your website? What happens once they begin a call? Are they successfully completing their encounters? What are the attrition rates on your virtual front door? Are you able to reach into new demographics?

When you grow your virtual healthcare solution with a patient-first approach, you will see improvements in patient engagement and satisfaction, and ultimately, patient health.

How Care Navigator Creates a Better Virtual Experience

Using the Bluestream Health Care Navigator, health systems can quickly construct a unique experience for their patients without the expense of custom app development. Clinicians gain more control over the virtual experience, making each encounter feel more personal and comfortable for the patients.

Care Navigator creates a unique URL for each patient encounter. It is their permanent and personalized landing page. Care Navigator shows patients dynamic content that adapts to where they are in the patient journey.

Before the appointment, Care Navigator can:

- Perform a tech and connection check
- Provide pre-visit forms to complete and sign
- Remind the patient when and where the appointment will be
- Help the patient message their provider
- Offer an on-demand visit

During the appointment, Care Navigator can:

- Automatically reconnect a dropped call
- Inform the patient if their clinician is running late
- Connect other people to the call, like a translator, specialist, or family member
- Allow the clinician to redirect the patient to ExpressCare
- Help the clinician easily manage the virtual care experience

After the appointment, Care Navigator can:

- Help the patient schedule a new appointment
- Give the patient a report of their appointment and lab results
- Connect the patient to an NPS survey
- Offer an on-demand visit
- Facilitate messages between patient and provider

Bluestream Health Care Navigator: the future of personal, virtual care.
Interested to learn how your organization can improve the virtual care experience for your patients? Contact us today for a custom demo.

Conclusion

For virtual healthcare to work, it must focus on the patient experience. It must be truly accessible, regardless of the technology used. And it must create solid ROI opportunities. All these benefits are possible when you partner with a virtual care provider like Bluestream Health.

Bluestream Health's Care Navigator is designed so that even non-technical staff can create a personalized, adaptable digital front door for virtual care. Care Navigator presents each patient with a unique URL that leads them to a landing page designed for that patient at that moment in time. To the patient, Care Navigator is a friendly assistant, who helps them navigate both in-person and virtual aspects of their care. To the provider, Care Navigator is the helpful go-between who communicates with patients and keeps the office running smoothly.

Our innovative healthcare providers and plans are dedicated to improving the patient and provider experience. Join us!