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Commentary

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Strategic Use of Telehealth in Pediatric Emergency Medicine beyond the COVID-19 Response

Sarah Thompson*

Department of Community Medicine, University of California, Los Angeles, United States of America

***Corresponding author:** Sarah Thompson, Department of Community Medicine, University of California, Los Angeles, United States of America, E-mail: sthompson@ucla.edu

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Description

The adoption of telehealth services across emergency medicine has seen a remarkable acceleration, especially in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the various use cases, one area that has gained significant attention is the application of telehealth in supporting pediatric care within community Emergency Departments (EDs). These settings often lack on-site pediatric emergency medicine specialists and telehealth has emerged as a valuable tool to bridge that critical gap.

Pediatric emergencies present a distinct set of clinical and emotional challenges. Children often exhibit atypical symptoms and drug dosing, resuscitation procedures and diagnoses differ substantially from adults. In many community EDs, especially rural or under-resourced centers, staff may be uncomfortable or undertrained in managing pediatric patients. The integration of telehealth consultation with pediatric emergency specialists can help address these gaps by offering real-time guidance during assessments, procedures and stabilization.

Several pilot programs and health networks have implemented telepediatrics services with potential outcomes. These systems typically function through high-resolution video conferencing equipment that connects the community ED to a pediatric tertiary care center. The virtual presence of a pediatric emergency physician enhances diagnostic accuracy, optimizes treatment decisions and provides immediate second opinions for high-acuity or complex cases. For instance, in cases involving seizures, trauma, or suspected sepsis, timely specialist input has led to improved management and fewer unnecessary transfers.

In addition to improving clinical outcomes, telehealth in pediatric emergency care also contributes to parental reassurance. Parents tend to experience significant anxiety when their child is ill or injured, especially when receiving care in a setting that lacks pediatric specialists. Seeing a pediatric expert involved even virtually can instill confidence in the care plan, improve satisfaction scores and reduce the perception of inadequate treatment.

Moreover, telehealth offers operational and economic benefits. By reducing unnecessary transfers to tertiary pediatric centers, hospitals can minimize patient displacement and associated transportation costs. This is especially relevant for families in rural areas where travel to a distant urban hospital can be financially and emotionally burdensome. Keeping the child in the community setting, when appropriate, also helps reduce overcrowding in pediatric tertiary centers and streamlines healthcare delivery.

Despite its advantages, several limitations and barriers still minimize the widespread utilization of pediatric tele-emergency services. These include variability in technology infrastructure, reimbursement issues, lack of standardized protocols and resistance to change among healthcare providers. Ensuring secure, reliable connections and user-friendly platforms is essential to the success of these programs. Furthermore, there is a need for strong training and workflow integration so that ED teams can confidently incorporate telehealth consultations without disrupting patient care.

Equity is another important consideration. Telehealth has the potential to either bridge or widen disparities in healthcare access. It is essential to ensure that rural and underserved EDs have equal access to telepediatrics programs, supported by investments in infrastructure, policy alignment and funding. Additionally, interpreter services should be incorporated to support families with limited English proficiency during virtual consults.

Looking forward, the future of pediatric telehealth in emergency settings will depend on strategic partnerships between community hospitals, pediatric centers and health systems. Telehealth should not be viewed as a temporary fix but rather as a sustainable model of collaborative care. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence-assisted triage, wearable monitoring devices and integration with electronic health records can further enhance the efficiency and accuracy of remote pediatric consultations.

In conclusion, the utilization of emergency medicine telehealth for pediatric patients in community EDs represents a practical, scalable and patient-centered innovation. By connecting frontline providers with pediatric specialists, telehealth helps ensure that children receive timely and expert care regardless of their location. Continued research, policy support and technology refinement will be critical in realizing the full potential of telepediatrics and embedding it as a core component of equitable emergency care delivery.