

Telehealth and Occupational Therapy in Health Care Reform

What is telehealth?

Telehealth is a delivery model for providing health-related services at a distance using telecommunication technology. Telehealth is a broad term that can encompass many aspects of occupational therapy services. It includes the “application of evaluation, preventative, diagnostic, and therapeutic services via two-way or multipoint interactive telecommunication technology”¹

What is telerehabilitation?

Telerehabilitation “within the larger realm of telehealth is the application of communication technology for supporting rehabilitation services”.¹ As defined by the telehealth literature, telerehabilitation is often associated with rehabilitative services provided within a medical model.

In which occupational therapy practice area is there potential to use telehealth as a service delivery model?

Telehealth has the potential to improve access to occupational therapy services in various ways in every practice area: Children and Youth; Health and Wellness; Productive Aging; Mental Health; Rehabilitation, Disability, & Participation; and Work and Industry.

How can occupational therapy practitioners use telehealth within the framework of the Affordable Care Act and other federal and state legislative policies?

The Affordable Care Act supports infrastructure development, innovation, redesign, and care improvement projects that can include telehealth delivery and services. While these efforts are especially directed at remote and underserved areas telehealth may be a critical tool in relation to chronic care management, prevention and wellness, and reorganization of services delivery (e.g., accountable care organizations). Occupational therapy services such as consultation, assessment, intervention, education, research, and wellness delivered through telehealth technologies can support these initiatives and achieve goals of quality, cost control and health by providing access to care through these new means.

How does the delivery of telehealth services promote quality occupational therapy practice?

Collaboration between therapist and client is key to the occupational therapy process. Delivering occupational therapy services through telecommunication technologies allows access to care and services wherever the client is located, thereby removing barriers to care and promoting intervention approaches within the natural context and environment. This can influence performance and engagement of activities and affect health and wellness, participation, prevention, and improved quality of life.

¹ American Occupational Therapy Association. (2010). Telerehabilitation position paper. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 64S, 397–405.