



Insights into the Primary Care PA Experience During COVID-19

Six Months Into the COVID Pandemic

November 6, 2020 • August 2020 PA Practice Survey

Table of Contents

Methodology	4
Measures	4
Executive Summary	5
Primary Care PAs' Integration of Telehealth into Practice	5
Barriers and Concerns	5
Primary care PAs have concerns about telehealth	6
Mental Health and Well Being	6
What Is Next.....	7
References	7
About PAs	8
Data Tables	9
Table 1. Primary Care PAs Clinically Practicing Since March 2020.....	9
Table 2. Amount Primary Care PAs Currently Use Telemedicine.....	9
Table 3. Primary Care PA Familiarity with Telemedicine	9
Table 4. Primary Care PA Interest in Incorporating Telemedicine into Their Practice.....	10
Table 5. Primary Care PAs Who Have Used Telemedicine Prior to COVID-19	10
Table 6. Reasons Primary Care PAs Began to Use Telemedicine COVID-19 Among Those Who Did Not Use It Prior	10
Table 7. Perceived Barriers to Primary Care PA Practice in Telemedicine	11
Table 8. Primary Care PAs' Perceived Importance of Telemedicine as a Solution to Healthcare System Challenges.....	11
Table 9. Primary Care PA Perception of the Care Provided PA Telehealth.....	12
Table 10. Primary Care PAs Report of Reimbursement Challenges Related to Telehealth ..	12
Table 11. Primary Care PAs Seeing Patients with COVID-19	13
Table 12. Primary Care PAs Who Have Experienced Changes in their Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic	13
Table 13. Primary Care PAs Who Experienced Employment Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic	14
Table 14. Primary Care PAs Who Experienced Changes in Hours or Compensation During the COVID 19 Pandemic	14
Table 15. Comparison of Stress Among Primary Care PAs in August 2020 and March 2020	15
Table 16. Percent of Primary Care PAs Who Feel their Practices Are Ready for Surge in COVID-19 or the Flu	16
Table 17. Ability of Primary Care PA Practices to Care for Patients in Past Four Weeks	16
Respondent Demographics	17
Table 18. Primary Care PA Specialties	17
Table 19. Primary Care PA Gender	17

Table 20. Primary Care PA Race.....	17
Table 21. Primary Care PA Ethnicity	17
Table 22. Primary Care PA Experience.....	18
Table 22. Primary Care PA Role.....	18
Table 24. Primary Care PA Setting	18
Table 25. Primary Care PA Hospital Setting	18
Table 26. Primary Care PA Employer	19
Table 27. Primary Care PA Type of Hospital Employer	19

Methodology

During a survey that was open from August 9–September 3, 2020, data were collected from a random sample of 5,887 PAs, with a response rate of 9.6%. Data contained within this report represent all PA respondents. A total of 667 PAs responded to the survey, and 127 PAs in primary care responded to the questions within this report. The overall survey margin of error is 3.6% at a 95% confidence level. Response rates and margins of error vary by section and breakout.

Measures

On the tables that follow:

“Respondents” is the number of respondents to a question.

“Ratings” above a column of numbers indicates the number of ratings for an individual question.

“Mean” is the average, or the sum of numerical scale responses divided by the total number of respondents.

“Median” earnings are those at the 50th percentile, i.e., half of responses are equal to or above the median and half are equal to or below the median.

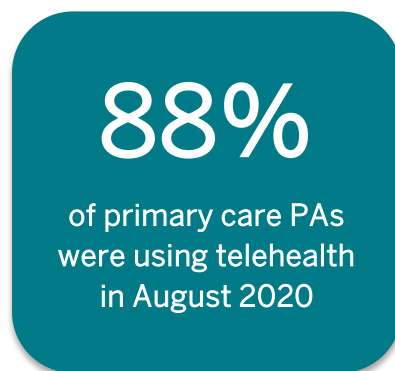
“N” refers to the number of respondents and is generally the first column in the data tables. Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Executive Summary

Primary Care PAs' Integration of Telehealth into Practice

Before the COVID-19 pandemic public health emergency (PHE) was declared, approximately 13,000 beneficiaries in fee-for-service (FFS) Medicare received telemedicine in a week. In the last week of April, nearly 1.7 million beneficiaries received telehealth services.¹

Most primary care PAs (88.0%) said that their practice has integrated telehealth; 70.6% have done so since March (Table 2, Table 5). Compared to all PAs, more primary care PAs have integrated telehealth into their practice (88.0%) compared to all PAs as a whole (68.4%).² In terms of frequency of telemedicine visits, one in 10 primary care PAs are using it more than 50% of the time in their practice and another 17.9% are using it 26 to 50% of the time (Table 2). As such, most primary care PAs have at least a minimal familiarity (87.0%) with telehealth even if they are not all using it (Table 3).



Barriers and Concerns

Despite the integration of telehealth, there are barriers to effectively integrating it into practice. Almost half of all primary care PAs (44.6%) see reimbursement as a top barrier to fully integrating telehealth into their practice (Table 7). Consistent with this, 36.4% of primary care PAs had digital health/telehealth billing denied; for 18.2% it is still an issue (Table 10). Similarly, 33.7% of primary care PAs are currently reducing their phone-based care because payment is poor. The same trend is not true for video-based care; 14.0% said their practice is reducing their video-based care because of poor payment (Table 10).

Reimbursement for telemedicine is a top barrier to integration into practice and will remain a barrier if the CMS proposal to pull back on some services covered via telehealth goes into effect.

While CMS is proposing to pull back on the types of services that will be covered via telehealth after the current public health emergency ends, the telehealth services available prior to the PHE will remain. Cutting back on certain services will hinder, but not greatly harm, Medicare beneficiary access to telehealth care. However, if other policies recommended in the 2021 proposed Physician Fee Schedule are enacted, reverting back to limiting telehealth to rural communities, and/or eliminating the ability of patients to have their homes serve as originating sites, there will be a substantial decrease in the availability and utilization of telehealth. Finally, Medicare's previous policy required patients to already be established to the health professional /practice providing the telehealth service. The public health

emergency waiver allowed for new/non-established patients to be treated via telehealth. If Medicare reverts to its established patient requirement, telehealth utilization will suffer.

Primary care PAs have concerns about telehealth

Despite the integration of telehealth into 88% of practices, PAs are concerned about the quality of care they provide their patients (Table 9). This concern is echoed in a recent Health Affairs blog.³ Yet, almost all PAs (93.2%) believe that their patients are satisfied with the care they are receiving (Table 9). This is similar to recent market research which found that the overall customer satisfaction score for telehealth services is 860/1,000 points.⁴ Almost three in four have tried virtual care, and of those 75% are very satisfied with it.⁵ Another organization found that two in three saw their video and telephone appointments held during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic as positive and acceptable substitutes to in-person appointments.⁶ Along the lines of the present research, market researchers found that 96% of patients who received telemedicine said that they were “somewhat/very satisfied with medical care” they received.⁷

Patients are satisfied with the quality of care provided via telemedicine

Mental Health and Well Being

PAs in primary care indicated that their practices are still under a great deal of stress. 80% say the stress among staff and clinicians is the same or worse compared to the first month of the pandemic. Some practices are experiencing more stress (39.2%) with some saying it is their new normal. For others, the stress is the same (40.8%), some are still struggling, and others have adjusted (Table 15).

Almost all Primary Care PAs say that their patients are carrying a heavy mental health burden.

In addition to the clinicians, almost every (90.8%) primary care PA said that their patients are carrying a heavier than usual mental health burden (Table 12). It may be challenging for PAs to manage their patients' care with attention to both social and physical concerns in an integrated manner as the pandemic makes it difficult. Just 37.0% of primary care PAs said that they can provide integrated care and another 52.1% say that they can some of the time, but the pandemic makes it hard (Table 17).

What Is Next

Primary care PAs indicate that their practices are confident or somewhat ready but nervous about the next surge in COVID-19 cases (72.5%), the flu season (68.6%), and the surge in issues related to deferred care (75.7%). The remainder of the primary care PAs say that their practices are not ready for this at all. (Table 16)

88%

of primary care PAs want telehealth to remain part of their practice after the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

Most primary care PAs are interested in integrating telehealth in the long run; 87.7% of primary care PAs and 69.4% of all PAs² agree that they want to use telehealth in their practice after COVID (Table 9). 69.2% of primary care PAs see telehealth as an important solution to broad healthcare systems challenges (Table 8). Patients are also interested in technology being integrated into healthcare moving forward; 60% reported that they want to use technology more for communicating with healthcare providers and managing their conditions, based on their experiences in the pandemic.⁷ A recent study has seen the number of telemedicine visits decreasing since the peak in late March/early April, now appearing to have plateaued.⁸ Healthcare administrators, providers, and policy makers will be tracking the trends closely.

References

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About PAs

PAs are highly trained and qualified medical professionals, who diagnose illness, develop, and manage treatment plans, prescribe medications, and often serve as a patient's principal healthcare provider. They are educated at the master's degree level in the medical model over a 27-month-long period. There are more than 140,000 PAs in the U.S. who work in all medical settings and specialties. To learn more about PAs, go to aapa.org.

Data Tables

Table 1. Primary Care PAs Clinically Practicing Since March 2020

Clinically Practicing	N	Percent (%)
Yes	121	95.3
No	6	4.7
Total	127	100.0

Source: August AAPA PA Practice Survey

Question: Have you clinically practiced at any point during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 1, 2020 until now)?

Table 2. Amount Primary Care PAs Currently Use Telemedicine

Use of Telemedicine	N	Percent (%)	
No, never	14	12.0	
Yes	Rarely (less than 5% of clinical time)	21	17.9
	Sometimes (5-25% of clinical time)	49	41.9
	Regularly (26-50% of clinical time)	21	17.9
	Most of the time (51%+ of clinical time)	12	10.3
Total	117	100.0	

Question: Do you use telemedicine in your current practice?

Table 3. Primary Care PA Familiarity with Telemedicine

Familiarity with Telemedicine	N	Percent (%)
Extremely familiar	25	21.4
Very familiar	30	25.6
Familiar	17	14.5
Somewhat familiar	30	25.6
Completely unfamiliar	15	12.8
Total	25	21.4

Question: Rate your level of familiarity/comfort with the practice of telemedicine.

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 4. Primary Care PA Interest in Incorporating Telemedicine into Their Practice

Interest in Telemedicine	N	Percent (%)
Extremely interested	0	0.0
Very interested	2	14.3
Interested	2	14.3
Somewhat interested	4	28.6
Not interested	6	42.9
Total	14	100.0

Question: What is your level of interest in incorporating telemedicine into your practice?

This question was only show to PAs who responded “No, never” to using telemedicine in their current practice.

Table 5. Primary Care PAs Who Have Used Telemedicine Prior to COVID-19

Used Telemedicine Prior to March 2020	N	Percent (%)
Yes	30	29.4
No	72	70.6
Total	102	100.0

Question: Did you use telehealth or telemedicine in your practice prior to COVID-19 becoming prevalent in the US in March 2020?

This question was only shown to PAs who responded “Yes” to using telemedicine in their current practice.

Table 6. Reasons Primary Care PAs Began to Use Telemedicine COVID-19 Among Those Who Did Not Use It Prior

Reasons	N	Percent (%)
Began due to a necessity to maintain social distancing measure for nonemergent visits	1	1.4
Began due to furlough or reduction in hours	70	97.2
Other reason	5	6.9
Total	72	100.0

Question: What was the reason you began using telemedicine after the COVID-19 pandemic started? Check all that apply.

This question was only shown to those PAs who indicated that they did not use telemedicine in their current practice prior to COVID-19.

Table 7. Perceived Barriers to Primary Care PA Practice in Telemedicine

Perceived barriers	N	Percent (%)
Patient connectivity issues	70	62.5
Patient comfort/familiarity	62	55.4
Reimbursement for services	50	44.6
Education/training	37	33.0
Access to equipment	29	25.9
Legislation restricting practice	27	24.1
Unable to fit into your clinical workflow	23	20.5
Other state laws and regulations	20	17.9
Practice-Level/Practitioner technological gaps and needs	17	15.2
Support from leadership	15	13.4
Lack of opportunities for PAs	15	13.4
Licensure requirements	9	8.0
Supervision requirements in my state	8	7.1
Other competing clinical priorities	7	6.3
Other	6	5.4
Total	112	100.0

Question: Please indicate perceived barriers to PA practice in telemedicine

Table 8. Primary Care PAs' Perceived Importance of Telemedicine as a Solution to Healthcare System Challenges

Importance	N	Percent (%)
Extremely important	20	17.1
Very important	25	21.4
Important	36	30.8
Somewhat important	32	27.4
Not at all important	4	3.4
Total	117	100.0

Question: How important do you perceive telemedicine as a solution to broad healthcare system challenges?

Table 9. Primary Care PA Perception of the Care Provided PA Telehealth

Statement of Care	Total	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	N	Percent (%)			
The quality of care I am providing via telehealth is as good as in-person care	103	4.9	41.7	45.6	7.8
The level of care I am providing via telehealth is in line with clinical standards	102	5.9	79.4	12.7	2.0
Patients are satisfied with the level of care I am providing via telehealth	103	14.6	78.6	4.9	1.9
I would like to continue to use telehealth in my practice after the COVID-19 pandemic is over	103	26.2	51.5	15.5	6.8

Question: How much do you agree with the following statements?

Table 10. Primary Care PAs Report of Reimbursement Challenges Related to Telehealth

Reimbursement Experiences	Total	Yes, and this is still occurring	Yes, but this is no longer occurring	No
	N	Percent (%)		
We have had digital health/telehealth billing denied	99	18.2	18.2	63.6
We have reduced phone-based care because payment is poor	101	33.7	10.9	55.4
We have reduced video-based care because payment is poor	100	14.0	9.0	77.0

Question: Have you experienced any of the following telehealth changes during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 1, 2020 until now)?

Table 11. Primary Care PAs Seeing Patients with COVID-19

Type of Care	Total	Yes, and this is still occurring	Yes, but this is no longer occurring	No
	N	Percent (%)		
I have tested patients for COVID-19	119	70.6	5.0	24.4
I have diagnosed patients with COVID-19 (with or without a test result)	120	73.3	2.5	24.2
I have treated patients for COVID-19	120	65.0	4.2	30.8

Question: During the COVID-19 pandemic (March 1, 2020 until now), have any of the following occurred?

Table 12. Primary Care PAs Who Have Experienced Changes in their Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Changes	Total	Yes, and this is still occurring	Yes, but this is no longer occurring	No
	N	Percent (%)		
I have been cared for appropriately by my employer	112	71.4	5.4	23.2
I have gone without necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	117	18.8	20.5	60.7
I have canceled and/or postponed patient appointments due to the COVID-19 pandemic	118	38.1	39.0	22.9
My practice experienced a decrease in patient load due to COVID-19	119	43.7	44.5	11.8
Physician supervisory or collaborative requirements have impeded my ability to provide care during the COVID-19 pandemic	118	8.5	4.2	87.3
My patients are carrying a heavier than usual mental health burden	120	90.8	4.2	5.0
My patients with chronic conditions seem worse	117	59.0	2.6	38.5
My practice's members have quit saying that COVID-19 made work unsafe for them	119	21.8	16.0	62.2
I have started seeing health impact of deferred chronic care visits	120	64.2	12.5	23.3
My practice offers preventive and/or chronic care but patients are not scheduling them	119	40.3	32.8	26.9

During the COVID-19 pandemic (March 1, 2020 until now), have any of the following occurred?

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 13. Primary Care PAs Who Experienced Employment Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Changes	Total	Yes, and this is still true	Yes, but this is no longer true	No
	N	Percent (%)		
Moved into a formal leadership position	120	2.5	0.0	97.5
Been furloughed (I will return to the same employer in the future)	119	4.2	9.2	86.6
Been terminated (lost job permanently)	120	1.7	0.0	98.3
Changed primary specialty	120	3.3	0.0	96.7
Changed primary setting (e.g., outpatient surgical center moved to ICU)	120	4.2	0.8	95.0
Changed primary employer	120	8.3	0.0	91.7
Changed supervising or collaborating physician	120	10.8	0.8	88.3
Began volunteering in a medical capacity	118	4.2	2.5	93.2

Have you experienced any of the following employment changes during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 1, 2020 until now)?

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 14. Primary Care PAs Who Experienced Changes in Hours or Compensation During the COVID 19 Pandemic

Changes	Total	Decreased	Remained the same	Increased
	N	Percent (%)		
Hours worked	120	35.0	49.2	15.8
Base pay	120	15.8	81.7	2.5
Bonus (actual or anticipated)	116	40.5	52.6	6.9

Note: Bonus may include annual and/or productivity-based bonus pay

Question: How have the following changed since COVID-19 emerged in the US (March 1, 2020 until now)?

Table 15. Comparison of Stress Among Primary Care PAs in August 2020 and March 2020

Level of Stress	N	Percent (%)
It seems worse – we are struggling	15	12.5
It seems worse – but we are sadly now used to it	32	26.7
It's the same – but over time, harder to bear	10	8.3
It's the same – but over time, we've adjusted	39	32.5
It's getting better	24	20.0
Not applicable, we never felt it at all	0	0.0
Total	120	100.0

Question: How does in stress among staff and clinicians in your practice now compare with the first month of the pandemic?

Table 16. Percent of Primary Care PAs Who Feel their Practices Are Ready for Surge in COVID-19 or the Flu

Conditions	Total	Yes, we're confident	Somewhat, but we are nervous	No, we don't feel ready	We are spent—so not ready for that
	N	Percent (%)			
A surge in COVID-19 cases:	120	20.0	52.5	25.8	1.7
A surge in issues related to delayed/deferred care	119	24.4	51.3	21.8	2.5
The upcoming flu season	118	16.1	52.5	27.1	4.2

Question: Do you feel your practice is ready for...

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 17. Ability of Primary Care PA Practices to Care for Patients in Past Four Weeks

Manner of Care	Total	Yes, without a doubt!	Sometimes... the pandemic makes this hard	No, but will again after the pandemic	Pipe-dream: this hasn't been for a long time	N/A
	N	Percent (%)				
First contact <i>they contact us first when there is a need</i>	120	55.0	35.8	1.7	1.7	5.8
Comprehensive <i>addressing majority of needs</i>	119	40.3	49.6	5.0	0.8	4.2
Continuous <i>seeing my established patients</i>	120	45.8	44.2	4.2	0.0	5.8
Coordinated <i>integrating care across settings</i>	120	36.7	50.8	5.8	2.5	4.2
Integrated <i>attentive to both social and physical concerns</i>	119	37.0	52.1	4.2	2.5	4.2

Question: Over the past four weeks, have you been able to care for your patients in a way that was...

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Respondent Demographics

Table 18. Primary Care PA Specialties

Specialty	N	Percent (%)
Family medicine	84	66.1
Internal medicine (general)	28	22.0
Pediatrics (general)	15	11.8
Total	127	100.0

Question: Please indicate your primary specialty as a PA?

Table 19. Primary Care PA Gender

Gender	N	Percent (%)
Female	89	70.1
Male	36	28.3
I prefer to self-describe	1	0.8
I prefer not to answer	1	0.8
Total	127	100.0

Question: What is your gender?

Table 20. Primary Care PA Race

Race	N	Percent (%)
White	103	81.1
Asian	3	2.4
Black/African American	6	4.7
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0.0
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Two or more races	3	2.4
Other	6	4.7
I prefer not to answer	6	4.7
Total	127	100.0

Question: Which of the following best describes your race?

Table 21. Primary Care PA Ethnicity

Ethnicity	N	Percent (%)
Not of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	108	85.0
Of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	9	7.1
I prefer not to answer	10	7.9
Total	127	100.0

Question: Are you of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin?

Table 22. Primary Care PA Experience

Years of Experience as a PA	N	Percent (%)
0 to 1 year	11	8.7
2 to 4 years	23	18.1
5 to 9 years	23	18.1
10 to 14 years	21	16.5
15 to 19 years	12	9.4
20 or more years	37	29.1
Total	127	100.0

Question: How many years of experience do you have working as a PA?

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 22. Primary Care PA Role

Primary Role	N	Percent (%)
Clinician	120	94.5
Educator	1	0.8
Administrator/manager	4	3.1
Not currently working	2	1.6
Total	127	100.0

Question: Please indicate your primary role as a PA. Your primary role is the role you spend the most time in as a PA.

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 24. Primary Care PA Setting

Primary Setting	N	Percent (%)
Outpatient clinic or physician office	113	89.0
Hospital	6	4.7
Other	8	6.3
Total	127	100.0

Question: Please indicate your **primary setting** in which you practice as a PA. For example: If you work in a hospital for 32 hours a week and an urgent care center for 8 hours a week, hospital is your primary setting.

Table 25. Primary Care PA Hospital Setting

Primary Specialty	N	Percent (%)
Inpatient unit (not ICU/CCU)	5	83.3
Other	1	16.7
Total	6	100.0

Question: Which unit of the hospital do you spend the most time working within?

Note: This question was only show to PAs who indicated they worked within a hospital setting.

Table 26. Primary Care PA Employer

Primary Employer Type	N	Percent (%)
Physician practice: Single specialty group	28	22.0
Physician practice: Multispecialty group	23	18.1
Federally Qualified Health Center	16	12.6
Physician practice: Solo practice	14	11.0
Hospital (including academic medical center)	13	10.2
Government	9	7.1
Certified Rural Health Clinic	6	4.7
Self-employed or independent contractor	6	4.7
Other healthcare related corporation	5	3.9
Community Health Clinic	3	2.4
HMO	2	1.6
College or university	1	0.8
Other	1	0.8
Total	127	100.0

Question: Please indicate your **primary employer type**. For example: If you work for a hospital for 40 hours a week and for a consulting firm 8 hours a week, hospital is your primary employer.

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 27. Primary Care PA Type of Hospital Employer

Primary Specialty	N	Percent (%)
Community hospital: Nongovernment nonprofit	6	46.2
Academic medical center	4	30.8
Critical access hospital	1	7.7
Community hospital: Investor-owned for-profit	1	7.7
Other	1	7.7
Total	13	100.0

Question: You indicated that your employer is a hospital. Please indicate the type of hospital.

Note: This question was only show to PAs who indicated they worked for a hospital.

Note: Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.