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Summary

- The coronavirus pandemic has enabled more Americans to experience the advantages of remote medical treatment which has until now been hampered by fragmentation and heavy regulation.
- The Trump Administration, Congress, and health insurance companies are looking to ensure the recent uptick in e-health business marks a permanent shift in how Americans access medical treatment.
- Aspects of American society, from professional sports to workplaces, are also repurposing existing monitoring and surveillance technology to address COVID-19 risks which further expands e-health possibilities.
- We expect that digitisation will be maintained long term thus providing opportunities for New Zealand healthcare and technology businesses.

Report/Findings

Health concerns around the coronavirus pandemic combined with limited accessibility to doctors' offices and hospitals for non-COVID-19 patients have led to millions of Americans accessing telemedicine services for the first time. According to FAIR Health's Monthly Telehealth Regional Tracker, telemedicine currently accounts for 13 percent of all US medical insurance claims – representing an increase of 8,336 percent to April year-on-year.

2. The Trump Administration has been moving to incrementally deregulate the sector before the pandemic hit with Senior White House Adviser Jared Kushner leading the Administration's efforts. In early March 2020, the Administration announced its policy to make patient health records more easily accessible. These measures allow patients to readily share their records with a range of e-health providers including medication managers and diagnostic services, price comparison tools, and link up to digital devices e.g. glucose monitors and blood pressure cuffs.

3. The coronavirus pandemic has been a catalyst for lifting other key regulatory barriers, albeit temporarily. Both the national emergency declaration and the emergency funding package were utilised. For example, the Administration allowed for the use of popular video messaging platforms, like FaceTime, which were previously blocked due to privacy concerns. Human Health Services Secretary Azar supports expanding telehealth provisions that were lifted during the coronavirus pandemic and the agency plans to work with Congress for greater coverage. "We'd have a revolution if anyone tried to go backwards on this. This is now an embedded part of our healthcare system."

4. Across multiple surveys, the majority of patients highlighted the convenience, accessibility, and safety of receiving virtual healthcare during the pandemic. Reflecting these views, a [group of influential bipartisan Senators wrote](#) to Azar supporting for the Administration's actions and a calling for temporary measures to be extended and made permanent. "Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more patients and providers see the value of telehealth."

5. Telemedicine is only one aspect of the US health care sector that has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Wearable smart devices are being seen not only as fitness trackers, but as sickness trackers. In an attempt to mitigate the silent spread of COVID-19 by flagging potential onset symptoms, the National Basketball Association has partnered with Oura to provide rings to all its players as the league prepares to resume. The ring will monitor player's heart rate, heart rate variability, respiratory rate and temperature—among other metrics—to craft a "Risk Score".

6. As COVID-19 sees a resurgence across the country, some hospitals are starting to use wearable technology to monitor health care workers' heart rates, sleep habits and physical activity for signs of stress and burnout. The Warrior Watch program, newly launched by New York's Mount Sinai COVID Informatics Center with a grant from Microsoft, is using Apple Watches to monitor hundreds of doctors, nurses and Sinai support staff. They have also created an app, where participants respond to basic questions about how they are feeling, to supplement the Apple data.

7. There has also been a rush on thermal scanners that have traditionally been used for defense and security purposes. FLIR Systems Chief Executive Jim Cannon reported that these devices were once bought almost exclusively by military authorities and industrial giants, but an influx of small businesses, public venues, and other non-traditional customers' have fuelled a surge in demand.

8. In preparation for reopening, businesses are installing technologies to ensure their workers stay safely apart and can be sent home after potential exposure to a coronavirus-infected colleague. Video monitors stationed around offices and warehouses provide instant visual feedback when employees come within six feet of each other. Company smartphones are using Bluetooth to detect when two people are close enough to each other to constitute an exposure risk. Large manufacturers are testing out wristbands that buzz when employees get too close.

9. There remain concerns in some quarters about the potential implications of e-health for fraud, privacy breaches, and healthcare budgets. In response to these concerns being raised during the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pension's telehealth hearing in mid-June, a group of influential healthcare leaders – representing a broad spectrum of insurers, providers, consumer advocates, and health quality experts from the public, private and non-profit sectors – have formed the Taskforce on Telehealth to ensure its permanent expansion.

10. The shift in US public opinion and increased demand in e-health products provides opportunities for New Zealand businesses and we are beginning to see business take advantage. NZTE has supported New Zealand businesses by holding a webinar on the topic.

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