

## CMS Moves to Broaden Tele-Health benefit to Wellness Visits

In an effort to increase care in rural areas, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) proposed that annual wellness visits conducted via telehealth be added as a covered benefit for Medicare beneficiaries.

According to an update to the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule for the calendar year 2015, these services would be covered as Category 1 and are described as "similar to professional consultations, office visits, and office psychiatry services" which are currently covered benefits. Wellness benefits provided via telehealth would include an initial visit, a personal prevention plan of service and a follow-up visit.

"This is a great step by CMS, increasing the quality of life and decreasing the transportation costs and time for patients in rural areas for additional services," said Brad Tritle, recently named President and CEO for Vitaphone e-health Solutions. "We look forward to CMS continuing to align its reimbursement with the use of tele-health programs that improve the Triple Aim of improved outcomes, decreased costs, and increased patient satisfaction."

The rule was announced July 10 and published in the Federal Register July 11, 2014 (see link below). The agency will accept comments on the proposed rule through September 2, 2014.

While CMS may be focused on increasing access to care in rural areas, let there be no doubt that this is a cost savings approach for the agency as well. Telehealth has seen explosive growth in metropolitan areas in recent months as well. Health systems who are committed to a population health model are implementing remote monitoring programs to shorten length of stay and reduce costs. Patients are going home sooner, or to SNF's who have partnered with the hospital and opened remote monitoring units ([click here to learn more about SNF remote monitoring units](#)).

This is just another step toward keeping patients out of the hospital, that will ultimately lead to drastic declines in inpatient revenue.



Josh Luke

*Josh Luke, President of the Readmission Prevention Group, works with health systems to develop population management strategies that develop new and increased revenue streams for the health system.*