

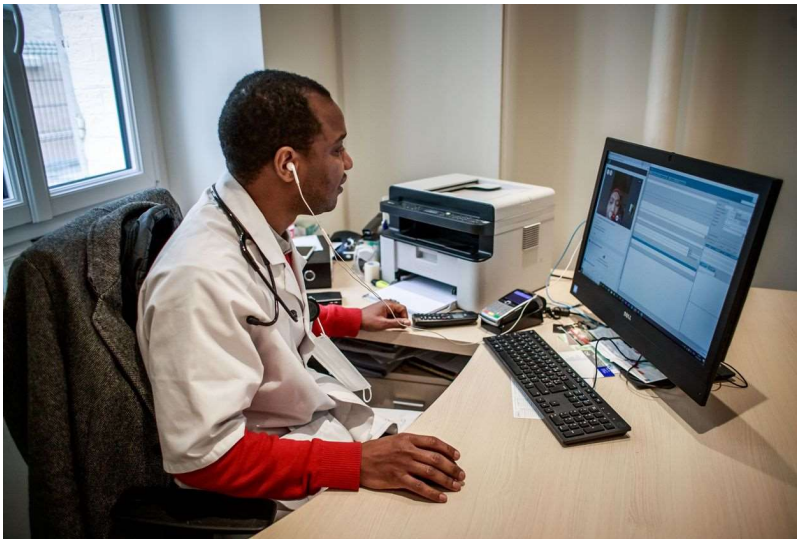
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HEALTH

Telemedicine, Once a Hard Sell, Can't Keep Up With Demand

The new coronavirus outbreak is testing the industry's capacity, sending companies scrambling for doctors and new services



Telemedicine companies are seeing a dramatic increase in consultation requests as the coronavirus pandemic continues. Above, a doctor conducts an online consultation, Paris, France.

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHE PETIT TESSON/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Parmy Olson

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The coronavirus pandemic is pushing the once-niche telemedicine industry into the mainstream, testing its ability to keep up with soaring demand and forcing innovation on the fly.

Before the outbreak, telemedicine struggled to take hold, in part because of government regulation and a lack of interest from patients and big companies. Now, companies like Teladoc Health Inc. TDOC -5.91% ▼ and Doctor on Demand Inc. are racing to add doctors and bandwidth, while big tech firms like Microsoft Corp. add services. Whether the flurry is a short-term response to the crisis, or a more lasting shift in health care is still unknown.

The largest stand-alone telemedicine service in the U.S., publicly traded Teladoc, has been slammed with calls. The Purchase, N.Y., company reported a 50% increase in service through March 20 compared with the week prior. It provides video consultations with a network of thousands of doctors through its app, charging subscription fees to insurers and large employers. It also offers individual consultations.

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Before the coronavirus pandemic, would you have considered a doctor visit by video? Join the conversation below.

Jennifer Fritz-Crist, a 34-year-old in Dallas, said she waited 22 hours to hold a video call with a Teladoc provider last month, before her appointment ultimately was canceled. She had recently been in the emergency room with pneumonia and wanted to renew a prescription.

When Ms. Fritz-Crist tried another large telemedicine firm, Doctor on Demand, based in San Francisco, she couldn't register because the site's online "waiting room" was full.

Teladoc said it has seen a dramatic increase in consultation requests, leading to longer response times. It has added thousands of doctors to its network, targeting them with online ads and directly through social media. The company said it has recruited doctors who work in nonessential areas such as allergy and endocrinology—departments that are being temporarily shut down in some hospitals.

Teladoc is also paying more to lure doctors, though it wouldn't disclose rates. Many of its consultants work for the platform in addition to their day jobs, such as for an hour in the evening after finishing a shift.

Doctor on Demand said a surge in inquiries had led to increased wait times. It said it was adding more doctors to its platform, as well as more computing infrastructure. It is increasing incentives to bring more doctors on board, the company said, without elaborating. It also built a simple Covid-19 symptom checker, which would-be patients fill out before getting a video appointment, to triage users.

Dublin, Ohio-based Updox LLC, which rolled out a video-calling service for doctors a year ago, said it has brought on 10,000 new customers in the past two weeks. It is hiring sales and support staff.

Companies are rolling out new products, too. Executives at Swedish firm Kry International AB, one of the biggest telemedicine providers in Europe, added a new, free service that allows any

doctor in the world to send a link to a video consultation via text message, instead of through the app.

Registrations for Kry's app are up more than 200%. Kry is paying more than 2,000 doctors to consult with patients, up from 1,500 before the new coronavirus crisis. Last week, it added 200 doctors in France. Most new doctors are recruited through referrals from other doctors.

JD Health, the telemedicine division of Chinese e-commerce giant [JD.com](#), launched a new feature that connects a corps of doctors with the 60 million Chinese outside the country, via its website, now that the disease is waning at home and spreading quickly in the rest of the world.

Around 40 doctors who worked at hospitals in Hubei province, where the outbreak originated, are working part time on that platform while at home in quarantine. JD Health estimates the pandemic has sped up a shift by Chinese consumers to telemedicine by five years, a spokesman said.

Currently, telemedicine is a patchwork of efforts by big and small firms around the world. A longstanding challenge for the industry has been sometimes-conflicting government rules about the provision of health care and how to protect patient privacy. Insurance and reimbursements for the services vary.

Patients have been slow to embrace it, too. In July, a survey by J.D. Power found only 9.6% of U.S. residents had used telemedicine instead of a doctor, urgent care or hospital visit in the previous 12 months. In the U.K., before the new coronavirus crisis, just 1% of health care was delivered through video calls or text messages, according to the Digital Health Council, a trade body.

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President Trump gave the industry a boost, saying his administration's efforts to expand telemedicine amid the outbreak is "going to change the way our country functions, medically and probably other ways." Last month, Washington loosened the nation's cornerstone health-privacy act to allow companies such as [Apple Inc.](#), [Alphabet Inc.](#)'s Google and Microsoft to

facilitate virtual doctor's visits through their existing chat and video apps, like FaceTime and Skype.

The U.K.'s taxpayer-funded National Health Service, meanwhile, has ordered its 7,000 doctors' offices across the country to conduct as many video and phone consultations as possible amid the crisis.

Despite the government support and the recent surge in demand, the industry's staying power is still untested. "Yes, there's more demand, but there's more competition from established players who are adding telemedicine," said Kristin Shine-Polman, a digital health-care consultant in London. A lot of offerings are also being rolled out free amid the pandemic. "How to convert that into a sustainable business model is the big question," Ms. Shine-Polman said.

Big tech and health-care players, with deep pockets and trusted brands, are swooping in, too, potentially making it harder for pure-play telemedicine companies to benefit. In coming weeks, for instance, Microsoft plans to launch a new booking tool for hospitals and doctors, who already use its Teams collaboration software to video-call patients.

Still, players like Teladoc see a longer-term shift. The company said many of its first-time users have become repeat visitors. A spokesman for Doctor on Demand said the influx of new patients would be a long-term benefit to its business.

—*Kirsten Grind contributed to this article.*

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