

Tyler Morning Telegraph

Texas is right to drop its opposition to telemedicine

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The state of Texas has wisely dropped its opposition to telemedicine - the practice of physicians examining and treating patients remotely, using video conferencing, in a creative response to the nation's worsening doctor shortage.

State officials had stood in the way of one of the first telemedicine companies to try to do business in Texas.

"Teladoc, Inc. is a health services company that provides access to state-licensed physicians through telecommunications technology, usually for a fraction of the cost of a visit to a physician's office or urgent care center," the Cato Institute explains. "Teladoc sued the Texas Medical Board - comprised mostly of practicing physicians - because the board took steps to protect the interests of traditional physicians by imposing licensing rules such as requiring the in-person examination of patients before telephonic treatment is permitted."

Teladoc sued the board, arguing that the rules violated federal anti-trust statutes. Teladoc won at the lower court level, but the state appealed to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

But on Monday, the Texas Attorney General's Office filed a motion to end that opposition.

That makes sense for Texas. As Bill Hammond, CEO of the Texas Association of Business explains, telemedicine's time has come.

"Telemedicine is a cost-effective way to improve healthcare outcomes for Texans," Hammond wrote recently. "The convenience and lower cost of treatment through telemedicine can diminish existing barriers, improve Texans' access to health care and lead to better health outcomes for people across this state."

In a perfect world, everyone would be able to see a doctor, in person, whenever they felt the need. We don't live in that world. Household resources and health care resources are scarce, and must be managed.

"Cost is the largest barrier for people to receive the healthcare services they need; the other is access to doctors," Hammond explains. "Texas faces a severe shortage in the number of doctors - both specialists and primary care physicians. We rank near the bottom of states when it comes to the number of doctors-per-capita. Telemedicine is a way to make more efficient use of existing resources, and empower patients and Texas-licensed physicians to use modern technology to diagnose and treat common, non-emergency medical conditions."

Telemedicine could do tremendous good for Texas. Like the rest of the country, we're likely facing a worsening physician shortage. There are fewer doctors to treat us, even as the

Affordable Care Act has resulted in millions more prospective patients. And as the Baby Boomers continue to age, their medical needs will increase.

Telemedicine could result in significant cost-savings, as well.

“A recent report issued by the Texas Association of Business found that the cost savings associated with the use of telemedicine is staggering,” Hammond points out. “A recent study of the impact of the introduction of telemedicine consultations to employee benefits packages for a major national retailer found that in addition to saving an average of \$1,157 per encounter for those who used the service, these services saved \$21.30 per month for each enrolled employee.”

The state is right to drop its opposition to telemedicine.