How connective health technology can detect and prevent the costly patient safety issue of senior falls

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Falls by seniors are a serious, yet sometimes overlooked medical issue that are disturbingly common and exact a heavy emotional toll on patients and their families while contributing to escalating healthcare costs.

A quarter of Americans over the age of 65 fall each year, according to the National Council on Aging (NCOA). Falls are the leading cause of fatal injury and the most common cause of nonfatal trauma-related hospital admissions among older adults.

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On an annual basis, falls result in more than 3 million injuries treated in emergency departments, including over 800,000 hospitalizations. Annual medical costs related to non-fatal falls total $50 billion, but that number is expected to rise to $101 billion by 2030 as the senior population continues to grow.

Falls can significantly reduce seniors' quality of life. While the overall statistics related to falls are staggering, it is also important to consider the effect of falls on the individual patients who experience them. For example, a growing number of seniors fear falling and, consequently, limit their activities and social engagements, sometimes leading to further physical decline, depression, social isolation, and feelings of helplessness.

Fall prevention through connective care platforms

While some observers may regard falls as a natural component of the aging process, they don't have to be. Indeed, many falls that do occur are preventable. The NCOA recommends several steps seniors and caregivers can take toward fall prevention, such as building personal balance, strength, and flexibility; reviewing medications to ensure that side effects don't increase the risk of falling; and removing tripping hazards around the home.

However, in recent years, another option has emerged, driven in part by the "aging in place" trend among seniors, in addition to disruptions in care delivery caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: connective care platforms.

Connective care platforms support remote patient monitoring (RPM) programs or personal emergency response services (PERS) and link patients to their providers or caregivers from their homes, enabling patients to remain safely in their homes to receive the timely care they require. These platforms also can improve medication management for seniors, helping prevent declines in health that may lead to falls. For healthcare organizations, the concept of "aging in place" will be key to improving patient satisfaction and safety, as a recent survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers' (PwC) Health Research Institute found that more than 75% of patients would like to receive care in their homes as they age.

In addition to satisfying patient desire for more in-home care, connective care platforms benefit the payer and provider organizations that utilize these solutions. By having real-time insights into a patient's health, decisions can

be made, and treatment can be administered without requiring return trips to the hospital or clinic. This has a meaningful impact on the clinical side of the equation, as well as on the bottom line, reducing the number of costly readmissions or visits to the emergency room. According to KLAS Research, one-fourth of healthcare organizations say remote patient monitoring reduces emergency room visits and hospital readmissions, while 38% say the technology results in fewer inpatient admissions.

In the absence of available in-person care in the home, technology can fill the gaps to ensure that treatment isn't being sacrificed. Vitals are monitored and staff can take a more proactive approach to care so that patients' conditions do not deteriorate simply because they are not at brick-and-mortar facilities.

Following are three ways that connective care technology can mitigate the impact of falls by seniors:

Assessing risk: Patients sometimes contact payers' and providers' call centers to report that they need lift assistance or have fallen out of their wheelchair. These touchpoints represent opportunities for healthcare organizations to gather data points that provide further detail into patients' conditions, and whether they need additional interventions, such as a referral to a case manager. Connective care systems deliver additional data points, such as gait speed and the time it takes to get out of a wheelchair, that can be used to assess patient risk for future falls.

Prescribing interventions: Data gathered through connective care systems can be routed to the appropriate provider – whether a physical therapist, specialist, nurse practitioner or primary care physician – to inform them of changes to patients' conditions that may require further interventions. For example, a patient experiencing high blood pressure may have fallen when her blood pressure spikes, prompting her provider to increase her medication dosage. Detection before an event occurs is the best form of prevention.

Connecting patients to additional services: While connective care solutions such as RPM and PERS can make a big difference in falls prevention, no one technology or approach will solve the problem alone. Sensors installed around seniors' homes as part of these solutions may alert providers to the need for additional services or resources in patients' homes, such as grab bars in bathrooms or on stairways.

Falls by the elderly are a pervasive problem across the U.S. healthcare system that may lead to emotional trauma and rising costs, but perhaps the most tragic aspect of the issue is that so many of them are preventable. With technology that links patients to their providers and caregivers, healthcare organizations can begin to reduce the individual and system-wide burdens of falls. Due to its ability to transform healthcare through lower costs, in addition to relieving healthcare's staffing shortage, falls prevention must be emphasized at all points of the healthcare journey by all stakeholders.

About the author: Rosemary Kennedy is Connect America's Chief Health Informatics Officer, with expertise in delivering innovative, value-based healthcare by utilizing health information technology and process redesign to improve quality, safety, costs and performance of care delivery, in the home.