

Why ER Doctors Should Embrace In-Home Acute Care

By **Amal Agarwal, DO FACEP, MBA**, Vice President Home Solutions at Humana

Healthcare has a long history inside the home, where doctors are able to build intimate relationships with patients to deliver personalized and effective medicine. However, the evolving healthcare landscape over the past 40 years has resulted in an increased shift away from in-home care to the hospital for a range of conditions and severities.

Hospitals today see all types of patients, ranging from a mild stomachache or ankle sprain to a cardiac arrest, stroke or traumatic injury. The wide spectrum of patients and lack of accessible care options—compounded more recently by the COVID-19 pandemic—have led to unprecedented demand for hospital beds, causing long wait times in systems that are often already understaffed. If not addressed effectively, we risk compromised care for patients and burnout among overworked healthcare providers.

It's time to move many healthcare services back inside of the home.

Getting Back to the Home

While not everything can be done in the home, such as invasive procedures requiring anesthesia, there are many cases where in-home care can prove not only convenient, but can also result in improved clinical outcomes – at a lower cost to the patient. When used appropriately, in-home care also allows for a better understanding and relationship between patient and doctor, potentially leading to improved health outcomes.

When patients with less severe illnesses are treated in their home rather than in a hospital, it allows space for higher-priority patients who need critical care. Many of the patients seen in the emergency department do not require the level and cost of care that the emergency room provides. Treating patients at home is beneficial to patients and hospitals alike: it allows hospitals to provide ICU-level care to those that need it most, while allowing patients with more mild illnesses to be treated in the comfort of their own homes at a much lower cost.

Treating the “Whole-Person” In the Home

Many outside factors contribute to a patient's health that are hard to uncover in the hospital or doctor's office. By moving health services inside of the home, doctors can identify and address challenges patients are facing in their day-to-day lives,

including transportation limitations, food and financial insecurities, unsanitary living conditions, and inadequate housing. This arrangement allows the provider to clarify health goals and expectations together with the patient, family and caregiver—something that is very difficult to do in an acute hospital setting.

Addressing these social determinants of health (SDOH) will help curb the number of repeat visits to the emergency room. Time and time again, I see patients discharged from the hospital and readmitted within just a few weeks with the same signs and symptoms. These repeat patients end up having significant medical bills and exacerbations, since the true root of the problem might be an external factor that is not being addressed. If I can see inside a patient's home, I get a clearer picture of what that patient's life is like.

Because of the ability to address more than one health issue in the home, embracing in-home care has proven to be more cost effective and provides far better health outcomes than hospital care alone. A study published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that the median cost of acute care for in-home patients was 52% lower than the study's in-hospital control group.

The Future of Hospital and In-Home Care

As someone who has experience both in the ED and in home-based healthcare, I have seen the benefits of a hybrid approach to care, with care in the hospital and home settings complementing each other. Hospitals provide excellent high-acuity and ICU-level care, while in-home care can provide personalized treatment using most of the same technologies.

With COVID-19 accelerating the evolution toward in-home care, the potential – and expectations – for growth in this sector are immense, especially as in-home capabilities and technologies improve. These two methods of care delivery work best in conjunction, relying on each other to maximize efficiency and ensure that patients have a positive experience as well as receive the highest standard of care.

Embracing healthcare in the home is the next step in advancing our healthcare system. Patients are asking for it, physicians see the benefits, and payers see the value. In-home care is simply better for the whole ecosystem.



Amal Agarwal, D.O., MBA, is Vice President, Home Solutions Business Development and Strategy at Humana, and a board-certified emergency room physician. He serves as clinical faculty—gratis at the University of Louisville and continues to practice emergency medicine at the Louisville Veterans Affairs Medical Center. He also advises several healthcare start-ups.

Humana®