Research Article

Economic Modeling of Heart Failure Telehealth Programs: When Do They Become Cost Saving?

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Received 29 November 2015; Accepted 18 April 2016

Academic Editor: Fei Hu

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Telehealth programs for congestive heart failure have been shown to be clinically effective. This study assesses clinical and economic consequences of providing telehealth programs for CHF patients. A Markov model was developed and presented in the context of a home-based telehealth program on CHF. Incremental life expectancy, hospital admissions, and total healthcare costs were examined at periods ranging up to five years. One-way and two-way sensitivity analyses were also conducted on clinical performance parameters. The base case analysis yielded cost savings ranging from $2832 to $5499 and 0.03 to 0.04 life year gain per patient over a 1-year period. Applying telehealth solution to a low-risk cohort with no prior admission history would result in $2502 cost increase per person over the 1-year time frame with 0.01 life year gain. Sensitivity analyses demonstrated that the cost savings were most sensitive to patient risk, baseline cost of hospital admission, and the length-of-stay reduction ratio affected by the telehealth programs. In sum, telehealth programs can be cost saving for intermediate and high risk patients over a 1- to 5-year window. The results suggested the economic viability of telehealth programs for managing CHF patients and illustrated the importance of risk stratification in such programs.

1. Introduction

Congestive heart failure (CHF) is caused by any condition which reduces the efficiency of the heart muscle and results in insufficient blood supply to the human body. The high prevalence and costs associated with congestive heart failure (CHF) place an enormous economic and social burden on patients and society. Between 4 and 7 million people were estimated to suffer from CHF in the United States [1], with an estimated total direct and indirect cost of $39.2 billion in 2010 [2]. Over the last decade, the annual number of hospitalization incidences has increased from 0.8 to over 1.0 million for CHF as a primary diagnosis and from 2.4 to 3.6 million for CHF as a primary or secondary diagnosis over the last decade [3]. Around 50% of CHF patients were rehospitalized within 6 months of discharge; this trend is expected to continue to rise with an aging population [3, 4]. Hospitalization incidences are the most expensive events within the CHF care cycle, with admissions contributing 62.5% of total CHF medical costs [5]. Controlling the frequency and/or severity of exacerbation is of paramount importance to both quality of life of the patient and managing healthcare costs.

Telehealth is defined as the use of video, electronic, or other telecommunication information to monitor patients and transmit data related to patient health status at a distance [6]. Telehealth programs have been both theoretically and empirically proved clinically beneficial because deterioration can be quickly detected and addressed [7–9]. However, the current understanding of the cost consequences of these telehealth programs in the home care setting is still limited. Such disease management approaches could add costs over standard care due to their significant requirement for human and technical resources. However, they also bring about some level of cost savings through reduction of hospitalization
incidences, length of stay (LOS), clinic visits, and the ancillary procedures. Understanding the cost-effectiveness of a CHF setting is the key motivation of the present work.

This study designs and applies a Markov model to assess long-term clinical outcomes and economic consequences of providing CHF telehealth programs. Costs are modeled, from the perspective of an American payer. The analysis includes telehealth install/uninstall costs, monthly monitoring costs, costs for nursing resources for data review and home visits, and pharmacy costs, as well as the usual CHF outpatient and inpatient cost. Scenario analysis was performed to assess clinically and economically feasible product performance-cost combinations. Through the model, we will be able to address the research questions of when and with whom the optimal cost saving can be achieved by deploying telehealth programs.

2. Methods

2.1. Telehealth Program for CHF Management. The model was developed and is presented in the context of a home-based telehealth program on CHF. Telehealth programs can be conceptualized as having two primary components [10]: (1) TEST: monitoring and detection of possible deterioration; (2) TREAT: early treatment and intervention upon the detection of deterioration. Detailed descriptions of these components can be found in Figure 1.

2.2. Markov Model. Markov models are state transition models commonly used to estimate the cost-effectiveness of a new treatment [11]. They are most widely used in healthcare economics literature to model lengthy and recurrent situations like the progression of chronic diseases [12]. They have been previously employed to investigate different CHF interventions such as screening, pharmaceuticals, devices, and disease management programs [13]. The study implements a Markov model using rehospitalization as an indicator for disease progression. The patient population is comprised of 5 living states and a death state (see Figure 2). Living states are defined by the number of prior hospitalization incidences for CHF, an important predictor of disease progression and prognosis [14]. A patient is characterized in the model as belonging to one of these states. The risks of mortality and rehospitalization depend on New York Heart Association (NYHA) classes. For each monthly cycle, surviving patients may remain in the current state or at risk for hospitalization or death (either from CHF or non-CHF causes). The simulation is able to be carried out at any reasonable number of follow-up monthly cycles. Although most current telehealth programs are utilized for one-year timeframe [7–9, 15], we examine the longer-term outcome by extending the time horizon of analysis for up to five years. Patient cohorts were analysed using this Markov model under both usual care (nontelehealth) and telehealth scenario (hosp/H: hospitalization; Rehos: Rehospitalization).

2.3. Risks in Hospitalization and Mortality in Usual Care. The usual care cohort is defined as the cohort without receiving any telehealth intervention. The risks of hospitalization and mortality for the usual care group were derived from previous...
models [11, 18] and their associated trial data [16, 17]. Table 1 summarizes the transition probabilities used in the current model. At the start of each monthly simulation cycle, patients move to different states according to these transition probabilities for hospitalization and death.

2.4. Efficacy of Telehealth Intervention. The mortality and hospitalization risks for patients in the telehealth group are affected by telehealth program efficacy. These risks are estimated in our previously published meta-analysis performed on 33 randomized control trials (RCT) between 2001 and 2012 from more than 9 countries with a total of 7530+ patients [15]. Follow-up of the individual studies varied with a median duration of 12 months. Key results for the meta-analysis are given in Table 2. In the current model, these meta-analysis findings were used to adjust the transitional probabilities for telehealth group through proportional reductions in transitional probabilities of usual care group as described in Table 2. Due to lack of patient level data, the model assumes constant reduction effectiveness across all cycles for telehealth groups.

2.5. Resource Use and Cost Data. All costs were fixed at 2013 US dollars ($) for the duration of the study period and
Table 3: Cost estimates.

|                         | Baseline          | Quoted references          |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Usual care              |                   |                             |
| Per CHF hospitalization cost | $12,000          | $12.7K [19], $11K [20], 10.9K [21], 12K–18K [22] |
| Annual CHF outpatient cost | $1,700           | $680–2700 [11]             |
| Annual non-CHF healthcare cost | $10,000         | $7300–13000 [11]          |
| Telehealth              |                   |                             |
| Install/uninstall cost amortized to each month | $15              | Based on field expert's estimate |
| Monthly monitoring cost | $80               | Based on field expert's estimate |
| Case manager cost per patient per month | $125             | Based on average nurse salary, assuming 75 patients are covered by one nurse |
| Total monthly TEST cost | $220              |                             |
| Physician contact/medication initialization cost per detected episode | $52               | Based on physician verbal order time and new medication cost |
| Nurse home visit cost per detected episode | $135             | Based on field expert's estimate |
| Total TREAT cost per episode | $187            |                             |

Figure 3: Cost consequences of deploying telehealth programs with certain exacerbation detection sensitivity and specificity. Note that there are two cost saving channels: when true exacerbation (+) is converted to non-exacerbation status (−), cost is saved through reverted admission. Even when true exacerbation is not reverted, through telehealth monitoring and early intervention, the severity of exacerbation can be reduced such that even if the patients are admitted to hospital, the length of stay would be reduced.

Final costs are represented in nominal dollars. Costs were calculated for each group from the perspective of American public payers. Indirect costs such as loss of productivity and the increase in sick days were not assessed as we focused solely on direct healthcare costs.

Our models synthesized inpatient and outpatient contributions to both CHF and non-CHF healthcare costs based on previously published studies. The cost estimates are summarized in Table 3. Besides usual care costs, the telehealth intervention cohort incurred additional costs. The recurring cost of the telehealth program (which is beyond the cost of usual care) consists of (1) the cost of monthly monitoring or TEST cost and (2) cost of early treatment when the monitoring gives a positive results or TREAT cost. These additional costs were estimated from field experts.

The costs of telehealth programs are affected by two additional technical parameters: (1) the sensitivity of the home-based exacerbation detection method (SEN) and (2) the specificity of the home-based exacerbation detection (SPE) [10]. Sensitivity refers to the probability of a positive test in a patient with an acute onset of CHF. Specificity refers to the probability of a negative test in a patient without an acute onset of CHF. These can be written as $\text{SEN} = \frac{TP}{TP + FN}$ and $\text{SPE} = \frac{TN}{TN + FP}$, where TP is true positive (true exacerbation and the test is positive), FN is false negative (has exacerbation but not detected), TN is true negative (no exacerbation and the test is negative), and FP is false positive (the test is positive but no exacerbation). Note that a FP will cause unneeded home-based treatment and thus incur unnecessary cost; a FN, or missed diagnosis, will omit patients from the early treatment and thus will not reduce admissions but still incur monitoring expenditures. Figure 3 provides an explanation of sensitivity and specificity and their relationship to the cost change in the telehealth program.
2.6 Outcomes. The three main outcomes of the model are the number of incremental hospitalization incidences, incremental health state outcome, and total cost difference. Health outcome is expressed as life years (LY). Utility values per disease state are not considered in this study. All costs were discounted at a rate of 3.0%, an accepted value for the United States [23].

2.7 Base Case. Three pairs of cohorts, each consisting of a telehealth cohort and a usual care cohort, were constructed. Within all cohorts, patients were distributed in the NYHA II or III population. Cohort 1 (C1) begins at the time when patients have no hospitalization at all. This cohort indicates the lowest risk population of heart failure. Cohort 2 (C2) initially contains a 30%, 30%, and 40% distribution of patients with one, two, and three prior hospitalization incidences, respectively. This cohort resembles the clinical cohort of patients with middle-to-high risk who are also considered as the target population for current-day telehealth programs. Cohort 3 (C3) is composed entirely of patients who have already had at least four prior CHF hospital admissions. This cohort represents severe, very advanced patient population whose condition deteriorates fast and is subject to frequent hospital admissions. All cohorts were tracked through Markov cohort analysis over the five-year simulation horizon. First-year, third-year, and fifth-year results were recorded, and overall outcomes were estimated at these time points.

2.8 Sensitivity Analysis. We additionally performed both one-way and two-way sensitivity analyses to investigate the effect of adjusting base case assumptions such as costs and transitional probabilities. Three scenarios for the performance of telehealth program were constructed to evaluate the impact of changing the telehealth efficacy parameters. Each scenario was defined by a different combination of five parameters as described in Table 4, representing a base case, a best case, a worst case scenario. Markov analyses were again executed in each of these three scenarios for all three cohort pairs. The base case parameters for modeling telehealth efficacy are given in Table 4 as well.

3. Results

3.1 Validation. We validated our model using the lifetime cost of the control arm, that is, the usual care cost of heart failure. Dunlay et al. estimated that total lifetime costs after heart failure diagnosis were $109,541 (95% confidence interval, $100,335 to 118,946) per person in 2008 dollars [24]. We simulated a cohort of the newly diagnosed CHF population (i.e., cohort 1, where no patients had any prior admissions) and investigated the lifetime cost by using 20-year time horizon (when over 95% of all patients have died). The total predicted cost from our model is $114,939 per patient.

Furthermore, we estimated the current economic burden of CHF in the United States by constructing a cohort where the weights of admission status were derived from the real statistics of American patient population (i.e., 70.7%, 10.3%, 4.4%, 3.3%, or 11.3% with 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 or more admissions, resp., [11, 25]). With 5 million affected CHF cases, the reported yearly direct costs of CHF in the states are between $33.7 billion [26] and $39.3 billion [27]. The model estimated yearly direct cost of American CHF is $36.2 billion which is in line with the reported value derived from multiple claim database analysis (clinical trials or population studies) conducted by existing literatures [26, 27].

3.2 Base Case Analysis. Results for the three hypothetical cohorts are given in Table 5. The base case analysis yielded cost savings ranging from $2832 (intermediate risk cohort C2) to $5499 (high risk cohort C3) and 0.03- to 0.04-life year gain per patient over a 1-year period. Applying telehealth solution to a low-risk cohort with no prior admission history would result in $2502 cost increase per person over the 1-year time frame with 0.01-life year gain. Expanding over a 3-year time frame, applying the telehealth solution to low-risk cohort (C1) would result in $6590 cost increase per person 0.08-life year gain. For the intermediate risk (C2) and high risk (C3) cohorts, the cost of telemonitoring is entirely offset through reduced hospital utilization, with additional cost savings of $5620 and $7683 per person, as reported in Table 5 (shown in years) and depicted in Figure 4 (shown in months).

3.3 Sensitivity Analysis and Scenario Analysis. The focus of the sensitivity analysis was to examine how different assumptions on telehealth efficacy would impact the estimated costs and clinical outcomes. We use cohort 2 in this analysis as this cohort represents the most clinically realistic population who might benefit most from telehealth programs.

In one-way sensitivity analysis, we reduced the default efficacy from full capacity (base case from meta-analysis) to 50% effectiveness. As indicated in Figure 5, the cost saving capacity of telehealth is more sensitive to LOS reduction than hospitalization reduction. Mortality reduction has the opposite effect: the less the mortality reduction is, the more cost savings it would bring about as more people would live longer and consume more costs, without considering end-of-life care, transplants, VADs, or any other enormously costly final options.

Two-way sensitivity analysis was performed to investigate the effect of adjusting admission costs (from $6000 to $16000) and the monthly telehealth TEST cost (from $50 to $450), under the assumption of default telehealth efficacy (base case from meta-analysis). For example, if admission costs are $10,000 and monthly telehealth fee is $250, applying
Table 5: Base case results.

|      | Year 1 | Year 3 | Year 5 |
|------|--------|--------|--------|
|      | Cost   | LF     | AD     | Cost   | LF     | AD     | Cost   | LF     | AD     |
| C1   | 12402  | 0.94   | 0.11   | 34982  | 2.47   | 0.48   | 54780  | 3.63   | 1.00   |
|      | +2502  | +0.01  | −0.02  | +6390  | +0.08  | −0.14  | +9826  | +0.21  | −0.28  |
| C2   | 25304  | 0.88   | 1.23   | 66812  | 2.07   | 3.51   | 93075  | 2.74   | 5.03   |
|      | −2832  | +0.03  | −0.27  | −5620  | +0.22  | −0.60  | −3422  | +0.46  | −0.55  |
| C3   | 32916  | 0.84   | 1.90   | 75515  | 1.91   | 4.39   | 99024  | 2.47   | 5.79   |
|      | −5499  | +0.04  | −0.36  | −7683  | +0.25  | −0.55  | −4456  | +0.50  | −0.4   |

AD: admission; LY: life years.

Telehealth results are incremental values, compared to usual care.

Figure 4: Base case analyses for three cohorts. (a) Cost saving curves as a function of number of years on telehealth programs; (b) hospitalization reduction curves as a function of number of years on telehealth programs.

Figure 5: Sensitivity analysis of cost saving curve for cohort 2.

Telehealth programs can save $2,109 in total in a three-year period by reducing the admission rates according to our model (see Table 6).

Moreover, the base case analysis assumes that patients at different risk levels consume the same amount of telehealth services (TEST cost is $220 per month, see Table 3). It is reasonable to argue that high risk patients would benefit more from active monitoring (which involves hardware data recording and transmission) than low-risk patients, resulting in a higher TEST cost for those patients. For low-risk patients, less intensive and less costly telehealth services (such as coaching and consultation) may be sufficient. A sensitivity analysis was performed to identify the maximum monthly TEST cost to be cost saving in the given time horizon assuming no changes in clinical efficacy from these varying levels of service.

In the context of a cost-avoidance model, the break-even point was defined as the cost for which the total cumulative telehealth costs for the CHF patients equaled the total cost saving through hospitalization and LOS reduction (cost savings or ΔCost = 0). Results for this break-even analysis are given in Table 7.

4. Discussion

In this paper, we apply Markov methods for examining the potential cost consequences of home-based telehealth programs that attempt to reduce the frequency and severity of exacerbations in CHF. We investigated multiple scenarios for cost and clinical performance for the program and assessed
Table 6: Two-way sensitivity analysis: telehealth 3-year incremental cost and cost-effectiveness with varying monthly telehealth service costs and hospital admission costs.

| Telehealth monthly cost ($) | 6K $Δ(cost)* | 8K $Δ(cost) | 10K $Δ(cost) | 12K $Δ(cost) | 14K $Δ(cost) | 16K $Δ(cost) |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 50                          | −2609        | −5264       | −7920        | −10575       | −13230       | −15886       |
| 150                         | 295          | −2359       | −5014        | −7670        | −10325       | −12980       |
| 250                         | 3201         | 546         | −2109        | −4764        | −7419        | −10075       |
| 350                         | 6106         | 3451        | 796          | −1858        | −4514        | −7169        |
| 450                         | 9012         | 6357        | 3701         | 1046         | −1608        | −4264        |

*Negative delta cost indicates cost saving.

Table 7: Break-even costs for different patient risk groups to reach cost saving in 1, 3, and 5 years.

| Patient group | Year 1 | Year 3 | Year 5 | Maximum monthly service fee ($) |
|---------------|--------|--------|--------|---------------------------------|
| C1 Low risk   | $35    | $48    | $56    | Year 1 $472 Year 3 $414 Year 5 $303 |
| C2 Intermediate risk | $634   | $552   | $404   | Year 1 $497 Year 3 $498 Year 5 $333 |
| C3 High risk  | $946   | $652   | $430   | Year 1 $497 Year 3 $349 Year 5 $236 |

Additional Points

(i) Telehealth programs have been both theoretically and empirically proved clinically beneficial, but current understanding of the cost consequences of these telehealth programs is still limited. (ii) This study develops a Markov model and assesses clinical and economic consequences of providing telehealth programs for CHF patients. This is the first attempt in this field. (iii) Telehealth programs can be cost saving for intermediate and high risk patients with one or more prior admissions over a 1- to 5-year window. The
cost savings were most sensitive to patient risk, baseline cost of hospital admission, and the length-of-stay reduction ratio affected by the telehealth programs. Regions with high inpatient care costs and high readmission rate would receive the greatest financial benefit from telehealth programs.

Competing Interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Acknowledgments
This study receives no funding from any outside sponsor, and there are no relationships to be declared for any of the authors. The corresponding authors would like to thank Michael Lee, John Ryan, Juliet Chon, and Linda Schertzer for the useful discussions and generous support.

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