

Telehealth & E-Health in Rhode Island 2020 and Beyond

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*Mr. Watson – come here – I want to see you.*¹
— Alexander Graham Bell

Who among us could have imagined in 1876 where telecommunications would have brought us today? The famous first telephone call, as near as I can tell, had no health implications to Mr. Watson or to the famed inventor Alexander Graham Bell, yet it did set the stage for a rather powerful technology infrastructure.

Although no one is suggesting we are ready for Dr. McCoy, from *Star Trek*, to utilize his tricorder to cure any ailment, we have come a long way in leveraging technology to advance healthcare. Using the Internet to power our electronic health records, to transfer digital images across the world for interpretation, and to perform robotic surgery from the corners of the globe are a few examples of how we practice medicine in 2020.

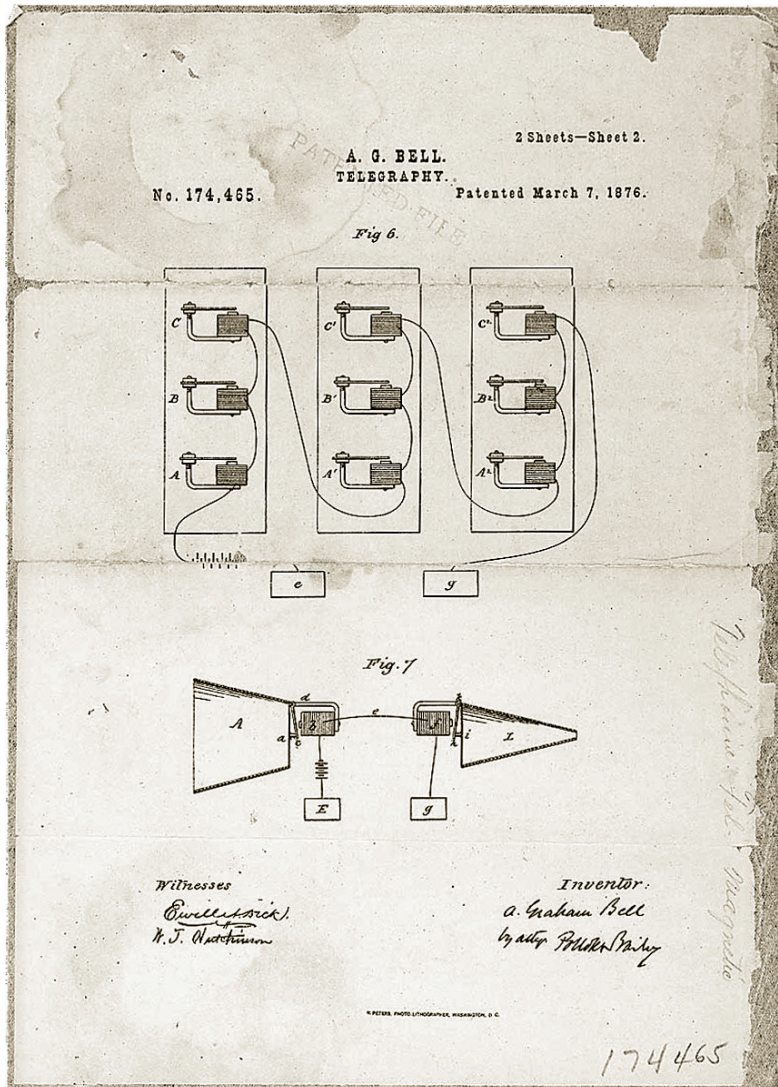
In Rhode Island, we have 5,288 actively licensed physicians, and of those, 24% (1,254) have license addresses outside Rhode Island.² Although not all of those physicians are practicing telemedicine, it is common place for radiologists, anatomic pathologists, and a growing number of other specialties to have licenses in many states so they can conduct telemedicine legally.

There are some applicable professional standards that have been approved by the Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline that are relevant to current practice.³ A general principle is a physician needs to be licensed in the state where the patient received care. Therefore, if the patient is in Rhode Island and the physician is in California, the physician needs a Rhode Island physician's license. It is also important that special requirements exist when prescribing a controlled substance. Physicians must have a business address in Rhode Island in order to obtain a Rhode Island Controlled Substance Registration and DEA registration.⁴ It is illegal to prescribe controlled substances between states without an appropriate DEA registration.



Alexander Graham Bell at the opening of the long-distance line from New York to Chicago in 1892. [PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

Telemedicine also requires that the same standard of care, as if the patient were evaluated in a traditional office setting, must be met. Although conducting a physical exam remotely can be challenging, advances in technology are making this easier. It is important to note that *“Treatment, including issuing a prescription, based solely on an online questionnaire without an appropriate evaluation does not constitute an acceptable standard of care and is considered unprofessional conduct.”*⁵ This requirement highlights the



Alexander Graham Bell's Telephone Patent Drawing, March 7, 1876.
[NATIONAL ARCHIVES]

importance of preserving the integrity of the profession and practicing medicine to the applicable standard.

Physicians are reminded about the appropriate privacy requirements to be evaluated prior to engaging in telemedicine or Internet medicine. It is important to use secure messaging, to appropriately document in an approved electronic medical record, and to maintain requirements relevant to HIPAA.⁶

As our profession moves more and more toward virtual healthcare, it is vital we, as professionals, remain virtuous and adhere to the high standards of our profession, while recognizing that E-health is much more than the future, it is the present.

References

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