

Patients connect with Catholic medical professionals on internet site

METUCHEN, N.J. (CNS) – Interest in telemedicine and virtual health care has grown steadily among consumers in the United States because of the convenience they offer.

Now, patients interested in combining the accessibility of these services with the unique qualities of Catholic health care have a new option available to them: MyCatholicDoctor.com, a nationwide virtual medical practice whose 40-plus medical professionals integrate Catholic spirituality into patient care.

Launched in January 2019, MyCatholicDoctor was the result of a 10-year discernment process between Connecticut-based Dr. Kathleen Berchelmann, a pediatrician, and her husband, who carefully considered what makes Catholic health care different from secular health care.

“Both focus on virtues like mercy and compassion,” Berchelmann explained. “We believe Catholic health care is so much more than hot-button issues like not prescribing contraception or not offering abortions and euthanasia. We believe in the definition of health care given by Jesus Christ in Luke 10:9, which is to heal the sick and proclaim that the kingdom of God is near.”

Berchelmann was most interested in the virtual health model because she felt it would fill a gap in U.S. health care.

“Many times, there’s a geographical barrier between the people who desire Catholic health care services and the people who

are trained and experienced in providing this kind of care," she told *The Catholic Spirit*, newspaper of the Diocese of Metuchen.

In addition to having access to health care professionals who practice medicine from a Catholic perspective, MyCatholicDoctor is fundamentally different from the typical telemedicine model where patients dial into a call center, speak to the next-available doctor, and rarely connect with them again.

"That's not who we are," said Berchelmann, who emphasizes that MyCatholicDoctors offers a much more personal approach and a deeper connection with patients.

"We want people to identify a provider on our site, read his or her profile, and feel comfortable with the provider before they even give us a name or email address," she stated, noting that specific health care providers can be seen by appointment or booked through a "see now" request for certain urgent needs.

She added, "We also offer a free 10-minute consultation with a patient's selected provider so they can talk to them and determine if they are a good fit for their needs."

Having a personal connection to patients is exactly what drove Dr. Robert Conkling, a New Jersey family practice physician, to join MyCatholicDoctor.

"Medicine isn't pure science, it's based on a relationship," he said. "The real problem with medicine today is that there isn't a lot of time for physicians to actually to spend with patients. ... Too often, medicine is practiced in a very sterile, businesslike environment."

Conversely, with the virtual health care model, he can spend more and better quality time with patients, getting to know them, understanding their concern and meeting their medical

needs without patients leaving their home, disturbing their travel schedule, or missing work or school.

Exemplifying this personal connection is the offering of Spanish-speaking services by one-third of MyCatholicDoctor providers, including Conkling. "It's great to offer this to patients. Language is how people relate to each other," he said.

As for what to expect of a MyCatholicDoctors appointment, health care providers meet with patients through video conferencing, via smart phone, tablet or computer as per the patient's choice. Medical records can be reviewed online and imaging, blood tests and prescriptions can be ordered remotely.

If in-person visits or surgical care are deemed necessary, patients are referred to a local physician that practices with Catholic principles in mind. Alternatively, patients can travel to a MyCatholicDoctors provider if they choose to.

MyCatholicDoctor offers a variety of services, but Berchelmann said the most popular are the infertility services because there is such a need for it. "The church's teachings oppose in vitro fertilization (IVF), but many people simply desire the NaProTechnology because it's good medicine and it works. In some studies, there's a higher live birth rate with NaPro than with IVF treatments."

In addition, she feels NaPro appeals to couples because it is more affordable than IVF, far less invasive than IVF, and usually doesn't involve the high doses of hormones and medications that IVF requires.

"That's desirable to people, but the primary barrier is geographic – reaching people who are experienced in providing it, which is where MyCatholicDoctor can help," Berchelmann said.

Other common services offered by the practice include general family medicine, behavioral health, mental health, end-of-life care, speech therapy, chronic condition (e.g., diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma) management, weight loss support and natural family planning education (five methods are offered in all 50 states, billable to insurance).

Regarding the latter, Conkling stated, "I think it's important to offer these services to people who can't get to a provider because of time or location."

When asked how MyCatholicDoctor may grow and evolve in the years to come, Berchelmann points to school-based virtual care for Catholic schools. "The American Academy of Pediatrics is very supportive of this concept of getting virtual care in all schools," she explained, noting that school-based telehealth is now mandatory insurance reimbursable without a copay.

Berchelmann said that about half of school-based telehealth programs at the high school level focus on behavioral and sexual health services, an area where she believes her practice has an important role to play. "The Catholic schools really need Catholic virtual pediatricians. I don't know of anyone else that is really providing that service with a true Catholic identity. There's a tremendous need there."

MyCatholicDoctor is starting in a pilot school-based program in Missouri in August. MyCatholicDoctor is now accepted by most insurance companies as an out-of-network provider, and it is becoming in-network at most major insurance providers. Cash also is accepted.