

## The Power of Collaboration: North County Health Services and Blue Shield of California Promise Health Plan Bring Safety Net Patients High-Quality Care Through E-Consult Collaboration

Since early 2018, North County Health Services (NCHS) and Blue Shield Promise have worked together to improve specialty care access for patients with the use of or e-consults.

NCHS, a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) with a mission and passion for equitable care, has 150 clinicians who serve 70,000 patients across 13 care sites. Blue Shield Promise, an affiliate of Blue Shield of California, is a managed care organization offering Medi-Cal, Cal MediConnect, Medicare Advantage HMO, and Dual Eligible Special Needs Plans. It has 17,000 members among NCHS's patient population.



Specialty care is a critical element impacting equitable care for safety net patients because of specialist shortages, long wait times and long geographic distances between patients and specialists. "We are acutely aware of a combination of the workforce shortage and the remote distances our patients have from specialists that are part of the Medi-Cal managed payer networks that

we work with," explains Patrick Tellez, MD, NCHS's chief medical officer.

E-consult addresses these obstacles to specialty care access by enabling asynchronous, peer-to-peer connections between primary care providers (PCPs) and specialists using a secure web-based messaging platform. E-consults, which are used to address non-urgent issues, deliver consultations from specialists that help PCPs determine the right course of treatment without the need for a face-to-face appointment.



"From the health plan and population health perspective, we want our members to have access to high-quality care, and waiting two to three months to see a specialist is not high-quality care. The main driving factors of e-consult's value are access to care and quality of care. That is why I am so passionate about it," comments Blue Shield Promise's Chief Medical Officer Tanya Dansky, MD

### **From Provider Pilot to Plan Coverage**

NCHS began its e-consult use through a pilot program initiated in 2016. At the time, only 30% of specialty referrals were fulfilled making specialty care essentially non-existent for NCHS patients, recalls Dr. Tellez.

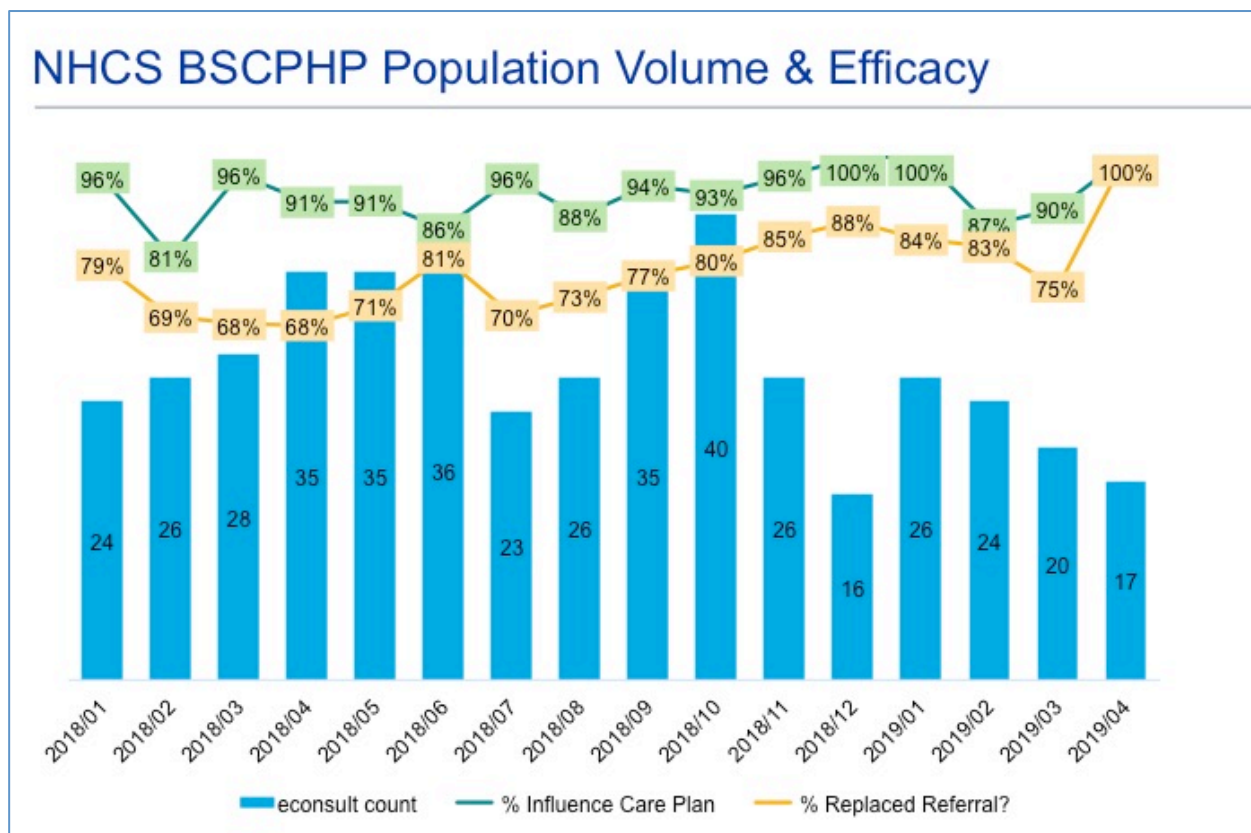
In addition to bringing specialty care to its patients, another of the pilot’s goals was to gather data and to bring a compelling business case to NCHS’s payers. To support this goal, the pilot was designed to include success metrics for wait times, access to specialty care, and need for face-to-face consultations.

Upon review of the initial data from these measures, Dr. Tellez says he and his team were pleasantly surprised by what they found. Early data showed that 65% of e-consults resulted in specialty-guided care in the primary care setting, delivering both better patient care and improving provider experience. After a year of piloting and presenting the resulting data, NCHS was able to demonstrate the value of e-consult to Blue Shield Promise, Dr. Tellez continues.

On January 2018, Blue Shield Promise began covering the cost of e-consults with AristaMD for NCHS for the nonprofit health plan’s members. Since then, NCHS’s PCPs have submitted 655 e-consults for Blue Shield Promise’s members; 75% of these PCP-to-specialist communications replaced face-to-face visits and 93% strongly impacted the submitting PCPs’ patient care plans.

E-consults enable the delivery of specialty care to patients in PCP settings because they provide specialist input without requiring face-to-face visits. The ability for PCPs to be part of this process enables better care coordination.

“E-consult creates a great partnership with our primary care providers because it keeps them at the center of patient care, which is where care coordination belongs,” commented Dr. Dansky.



Number of e-consults NCHS submitted by month for Blue Shield Promise members and percentages of e-consults that replace face-to-face visits and influence care plans.

## **Bringing High-Quality Care to Patients**

E-consults provide timely answers to PCPs and incur less burden on patients since they don't have to wait for another appointment, arrange transportation to that appointment, and take more time from their busy lives. With this timely access to care, patients don't have to wait for their condition to exacerbate for specialty access. And, as a downstream effect, earlier access to care reduces hospital admissions and readmissions.

Based on Blue Shield Promise analysis, there was a 53% reduction in transportation support need among Blue Shield Promise members that are NCHS patients.

The ability to receive specialist-guided treatment within primary care settings is not only convenient for patients but also reduces additional burdens such as missed work time or childcare.

## **Bringing Expanded Knowledge to Providers**

In addition to delivering the right care in the right place at the right time, Dr. Dansky notes that Blue Shield Promise also wants to ensure positive provider work experiences. AristaMD's tool has built-in measurement of provider satisfaction with early results showing high scores with e-consult. For PCPs, e-consult creates a "virtual multi-specialty group practice" that enriches their professional experience by expanding their medical knowledge and improving their confidence. And, importantly, NCHS's PCPs can access all these benefits working within their existing referral workflow without disruption.

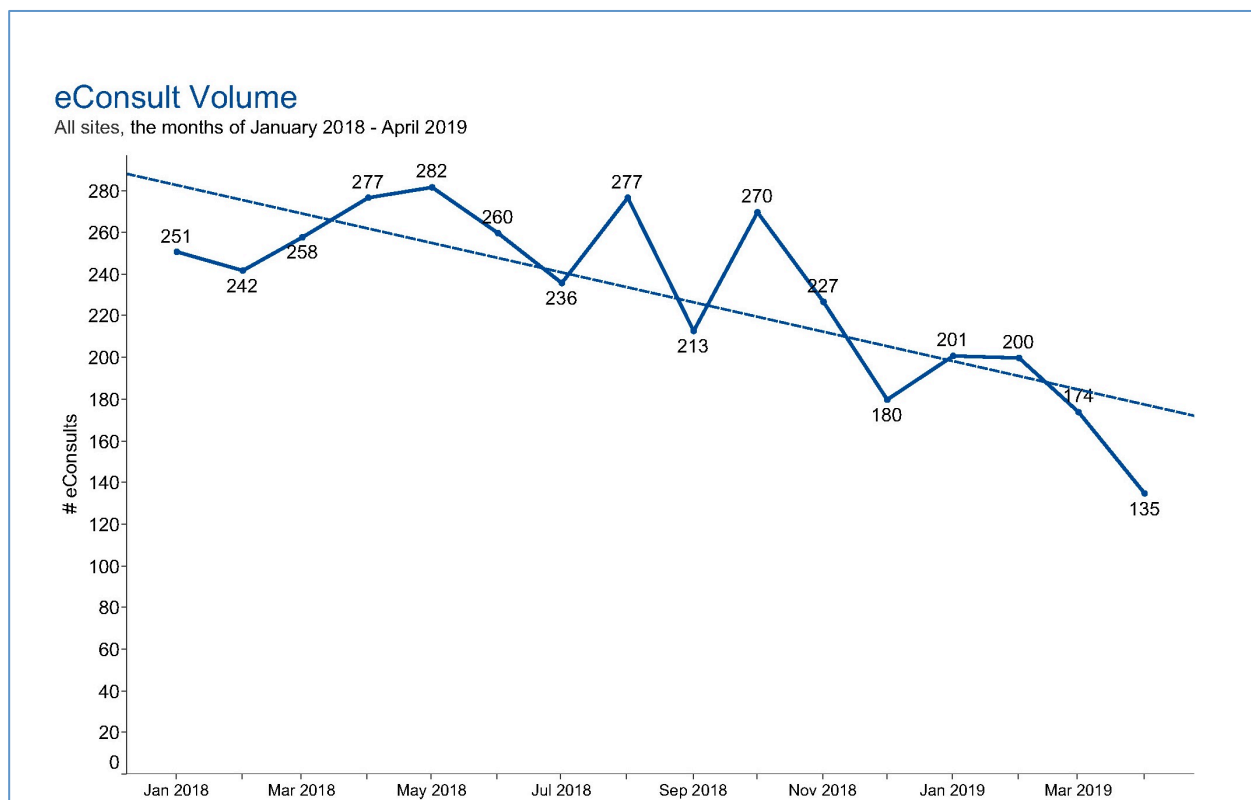
***"Primary care is very challenging. You need to know what you're doing but you also need to know what you don't know." Patrick Tellez, MD, CMO, North County Health Services***

Expanded knowledge is a strong benefit that e-consult brings to PCPs. "Primary care is very challenging. You need to know what you're doing but you also need to know what you don't know," points out Dr. Tellez. With the use of e-consult, PCPs are better able to determine when a specialty consult or referral is needed and learn how to do work ups and exams that specialists need.

This benefit is also one way that NCHS encourages adoption of e-consult among its providers, because it is not a mandated process. "When I talk to our providers, I tell them, this is an educational process for you. Once you learn how to use e-consult you become a better provider. You'll realize, 'I do need to learn something about taking care of a patient with X disease or Y disease,'" explains Denise Gomez, MD, NCHS medical provider and clinical e-consult champion.

"It's striking that primary care docs and mid-levels really get a sense of on-going professional medical education. As providers use the system, they learn and improve their confidence in managing certain conditions that in the past they may have referred out to a specialist," commented Dr. Dansky.

Interestingly, e-consult’s educational benefits decrease the number of e-consults per active provider over time indicating an increase in knowledge that enable providers to address patient needs without initiating another e-consult.



*Total monthly volume of e-consults submitted by NCHS providers from January 2018 to March 2019 demonstrates leveraged knowledge among e-consult submitters.*

**What the Future Will Bring: For NCHS More Payer Support; for Blue Shield Promise More Clinic Support**

Today, e-consult is in use throughout NCHS’s 13 care sites. Since January 2018, its providers have submitted 5,648 e-consults. Among these transactions, 75% have replaced face-to-face visits and 93% have influenced care plans, an exact reflection of the results for Blue Shield Promise members. To sustain access to these benefits for all its patients, NCHS is working to build collaborations with other payers like the one it has built with Blue Shield Promise.

“We want everyone to be in the model of Blue Shield Promise so we are continuing to accrue data to create a compelling business case for other payers,” explains Dr. Tellez.

At the same time, Blue Shield Promise is expanding its support of e-consult to both its own Antelope Valley clinics as well as other FQHC’s to ensure that its members have appropriate access to specialty care.

*Blue Shield of California is an independent member of the Blue Shield Association*

*Blue Shield of California Promise Health Plan is an independent licensee of the Blue Shield Association.*