

The Evolution of Digital Health – Panel Summary

Moderator: Gideon Fidelzeid, PRWeek

Panelists: Kathleen Harrington, Mayo Clinic; Chris Mycek, Cadient, a Cognizant Company; Brantz Myers, Cisco Canada; Trevor Price, Oxeon Partners; Stig Albinus, APCO Worldwide; Erin Humphrey, Text100

Patient-centric healthcare – boon or buzzword?

Panelists agreed the term “patient-centric” has become a buzzword and there is little consensus around its definition. A shared view on the patient-centric healthcare model would help to unify different stakeholder groups involved in digital health.

The model digital health is trying to shift is entrenched in decades of how healthcare delivery has been taught and practiced. Shifting to a truly patient-centric model will require changing attitudes and behaviors among all parties and more effectively communicating the value of the new model to them.

Digital health is a great opportunity for changing the model of health care to become more connected, value-based and less episodic and fragmented. However, digital health will not in and of itself ensure this change if the underlying issues in the entire healthcare delivery are not addressed.

Providers, for example, will need to rethink the entire customer experience they provide to patients and refocus on preventative care and long-term impacts. Providers will also need to address the fragmentation of care that contributes to the current state of healthcare delivery.

Digital health and the role of communications.

The panel offered different views on which stakeholders within the healthcare ecosystem are the most important for communications to impact if the promise of digital health is to become a reality.

Consumer education is the most important communications imperative, according to one panelist, due to overall low health literacy – often bordering on apathy – among consumers. This leads to systemic problems such as poor medical adherence, even among patients with potentially fatal conditions.

Another panelist said primary care physicians are vital to unlocking the promise of digital health as their role with patients becomes increasingly important as healthcare shifts to a value-based model. This group, however, has been slow to adopt new technology including electronic health records. Digital health, however, can not only help them do their jobs more effectively, but also more profitably.

As for policymakers, one panelist argued they continue to be barriers to innovation in digital health, specifically highlighting resistance among many lawmakers to technologies such as telemedicine that they perceive as detrimental to the doctor-patient relationship.

Slow adoption of telemedicine.

Adoption of telemedicine faces many obstacles beyond policymakers, but the state of the technology is not one of them, according to panelists, who agreed the technology already exists for telemedicine to not only be implemented more widely, but to have a transformative impact on healthcare.

Panelists cited the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ utilization of telemedicine to provide hundreds of thousands of veterans with improved access and care, particularly mental healthcare services.

Overall progress toward increased use of telemedicine is being made. About half of U.S. states have passed reimbursement parity laws for telemedicine services. Additionally, nine states have passed legislation addressing medical licensure, according to the panel.

Adding to the challenge, however, is the active resistance against telemedicine leveled by medical boards and hospitals that see the technology as a threat to their business, according to one panelist.

What's next for wearables?

While the wearables market continues to grow, panelists discussed a number of existing limitations with these devices, as well as the great potential they hold to help transform healthcare.

Among the current negative trends related to wearables is the high percentage of buyers who stop using them, with the average life of a Fitbit, for example, being eight to 12 weeks, according to one panelist. This speaks not only to consumer attitudes and behaviors related to wearables, but also the early state of the technology, according to the panel.

The future of wearables is tied to their ability to be used for more than basic health and fitness monitoring. Most wearables today are equipped with accelerometers, GPS and heart rate monitors, but one panelist said the devices will take major leap forward when they can accurately monitor blood glucose and blood pressure, as well as becoming gateways for patients and all health care providers to clinical data.

Panelists agreed those capabilities, along with other factors such as greater acceptance among providers and updated reimbursement policies, will make wearables a truly transformative digital health technology. Panelists forecast a time when data from wearables and other sensor-equipped devices is shared easily and immediately with providers.

One panelist described the potential for wearables to be used by insurance companies to adjust premiums based on consumers meeting or not meeting certain parameters, much like some auto insurance companies do now with a monitoring device drivers can opt to install in their vehicles.

Ultimately, panelists agreed today's wearables are being marketed for, and used by, a segment of the population who needs them the least, and that the potential for wearables and sensors to transform healthcare is in its earliest stages.

The future of digital health.

Panelists were asked to predict the most significant changes that will occur due to digital health, and their answers were as wide-ranging as their backgrounds.

One panelist described a healthcare system driven by consumer demand for more options, control over decisions and personal empowerment. The new model will include more reimbursement options based on a greater understanding of the value of technologies such as telemedicine.

Other panelists predicted the inevitable shift from managing illness to delivering preventative care and from specialist care to primary care, enabled by better diagnostics capabilities that can detect, for example, very early stages of cancer and other diseases. One panelist described the use of emerging technologies such as ingestible nanotechnology pills that aid in everything from early detection to medical adherence.

All panelists agreed that communications is an underleveraged key to unlocking the promise of digital health, ensuring that the complex web of stakeholders – patients, providers, payers and policymakers – all understand the value of digital health technologies and its impact on them.

About ATDigitalHealth

The Evolution of Digital Health panel was held June 11, 2015 in New York, sponsored by ATDigitalHealth, a joint venture between APCO Worldwide and Text100 Global Communications, offering communications and stakeholder engagement services to accelerate the understanding and adoption of digital health technologies.

Visit www.PRWeek.com on July 13 to read more about the panel when PRWeek publishes its eBook.

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