Mobile Health and Its Impact on the Patient-Doctor Experience

By Joseph Wager

With the proliferation of mobile devices and the expansion in use of them by average Americans, physicians are able to communicate more easily with patients, irrespective of their geographic location. As a patient moves through a delivery system, lack of real-time data and questionable communication frequently hinder the patient care experience. Mobile health or “mHealth” gives instant accessibility to patients and physicians, and it is changing the patient care environment and improving the experience for everyone involved.

mHealth tools help lessen, or even eliminate, unnecessary phone calls to enable a practice to deal with urgent and evolving situations more efficiently in the hospital and in the outpatient setting. Physicians can also communicate with their patients when rounding in the hospital or whenever it is convenient during the workday, and these tools can provide immediate access to education materials, prescriptions, and referrals.

Managing the needs of patients in vulnerable populations is a difficult and costly endeavor for the health industry. Many processes and systems are involved in keeping patients healthy: they may well need numerous medications, constant monitoring of their diet, lab work, guidance about exercise and smoking cessation, and classes for weight loss. In addition, patients are encouraged (or required) to manage stress, actively monitor goals and outcomes, and freely share information with their healthcare providers about their progress, and currently, mobile apps and devices help them manage their health and communicate with primary or specialty physicians. Also, mHealth tools enable patients to sign up for upcoming classes with hospitals and make appointments with their physicians.

mHealth tools are advancing the way physicians communicate and improving the healthcare systems. Physicians are able to obtain diagnostic tests, share results with patients, order prescriptions, and generate referrals to maximize the value of every visit. Mobile devices can be worn to collect patient data, which can be shared with physicians and case managers, or even a diabetic educator. Smartphones enable practitioners to check for drug interactions and drug dosages or perform a quick differential diagnosis. Imagine obtaining authorization for referrals, preoperative history, and diagnostics, and they would all be sent automatically to the surgery center or hospital after the physician has reviewed all of the results.

Today there are 2.16 billion smartphones globally with more than 200 million in the U.S. Early data showed that the U.S. population used mobile phones to access healthcare information about 20% of the time.

Healthcare providers need to study this new mode of care, and find out if mHealth can assist with patient out-
comes for various diseases and surgeries, decrease readmissions, improve compliance and adherence, provide an avenue of reducing risks for patients, and improve patient satisfaction scores.

Finding best practices
HealthLoop is one example of a cloud-based platform that automates follow-up care. The goal of the software is to connect doctors, patients, and healthcare providers between visits through clinical data that enables clinicians and patients to receive ongoing information. Data from its website indicates that patients experience a high rate of engagement with it. Because patients feel more involved, they avoid unnecessary phone calls to their providers. Patient satisfaction has increased with overall care, as patients are more informed about health issues, feel comfortable asking questions, and are also more at ease in making health decisions. These benefits will assist clinics and doctors attain excellent scores for the patient care experience.  

Jordan Shlain, MD, founder of HealthLoop, says he has been searching for 15 years for the “holy grail of engagement.” Over the past three decades, he notes, healthcare has moved from one crisis to another; they are often manifested by an “acronym solution”: HMO, ACO, PCMH, P4P, PQRS, each a valiant attempt to rein in costs and find a good solution for the challenge of aligning incentives. However, we can’t have hospitals, doctors, and health systems accountable for healthy outcomes if the nation’s 300 million people are not paramount in the equation.  

Trial and error in the new world of mHealth has led to some valuable results:

- Adopt what is going on in the industry and, at the same time, adopt best practices.
- Share data widely, and avoid ownership and control of it.
- Understand the needs of committed individuals and use them wisely.

mHealth tools are not mandated by organizations, but mHealth does provide a venue for instantaneous communication between physicians and patients. As a result, there are fewer face-to-face interactions, but hopefully there will be better outcomes for patients. Healthcare professionals will save time and optimize their visits with patients. Doctors will have up-to-date information on patients, with fewer surprises at patient visits. Physicians will gain ongoing accessibility to their patients’ information, which in turn will make for better patient outcomes. And patients will benefit by having immediate access to their providers.  


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