Why harnessing health data isn't enough

By Joseph Kvedar, M.D. | July 26, 2016

Back in 1995, when we launched what was originally called Partners Telemedicine, the terms "mHealth" and "digital health" didn't exist. This was well before the Internet, cloud computing, ubiquitous sensors, social networks, tablets, e-readers, mobile phones, and apps became part of the fabric of our everyday lives. I didn't know with what, with whom, or how we would be connecting to our patients.

I did, however, recognize the need for technologies that could deliver health in a manner independent of time and place. I knew that healthcare should be available to people in the context of their everyday lives, and that implementing care in this manner would improve both quality and efficiency.

In 2007, we renamed our center Partners Connected Health — coining a term in the process — to better reflect the trajectory of the industry. Fast forward to 2016: Connected health is mainstreaming in a rapid way.

Today, everything and everyone is connected. Experts predict that by 2020, 26 billion everyday objects will be able to capture, receive, and share data via a vast, interconnected global network linked together by inexpensive sensors, GPS, and the cloud.

Just around the corner, real-time health data will be automatically captured and used to learn more about the impact of lifestyle on disease and wellness, and ultimately change behavior for the better.

In what I'm calling the Internet of Healthy Things, or IoHT, virtually any object — a watch, a shirt, the steering wheel of your car, the mattress you sleep on — can be transformed into a data-collecting object and used to improve your health. In my book, "The Internet of Healthy Things," I wanted to take the lessons we've learned at Partners Connected Health over the past 20 years and bring them into focus, providing guidance on the investments, business strategies, and technologies necessary to improve health and wellness, and advocating for the best way to harness the power of the IoHT.

Devices and apps are just a small piece of the connected health market. Personal tracking data contains a treasure trove of information about how people live, work, play, and even think, which sheds a great deal of light on their lifestyles, habits, and preferences. It is also an incredible resource for businesses, insurers, healthcare providers, and entrepreneurs — even government health ministries — who need to better understand what motivates the health consumer.

The business of healthcare is also changing dramatically, with providers taking on risk for population-level care and consumers buying insurance on exchanges and paying a much larger part of their bills. And all of this medical information is available to patients on the Internet, creating a more aware and demanding healthcare consumer.

The disease burden is changing, too, with the ever-growing specter of lifestyle-related chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol and obesity. Healthcare delivery also needs to change, becoming more efficient and more patient-centric.

These growing healthcare challenges are well-suited for connected health solutions. But we are at a critical inflection point with health apps and devices. Many of them now have the ability to create a feedback loop of awareness, capturing data and returning it to patients or consumers. But that information alone won't maintain the behavioral changes patients will need to improve their health and wellness.

Instead, these apps must create a consumer health experience that is as compelling, sticky and, yes, as addictive as a smartphone.

We've learned that what ultimately works is simple design combined with the right, highly personalized motivational strategies that resonate with each individual, just when he or she needs it. From our research at Partners, we've developed three basic strategies, along with three tactics, that we believe will not just connect people to their data, but also connect them to their health on a deeper level.

The strategies — "make it about life," "make it personal," and "reinforce social connections" — are aimed at engaging with consumers to help them craft health goals that are relevant to their lives. Highly personalized experiences and ecosystems will keep people on track.

The tactics — "employ subliminal messaging," "use unpredictable rewards," and "use the sentinel effect" — need to be applied in product design, so that we can send very compelling messaging, sustain engagement, and deliver powerful motivators to make health and wellness a part of our everyday lives.

To imagine what connected health could be, we can look to other industries. Facebook Home, an app for android phone users, takes over the phone's login screen every time a user turns it on. Would health consumers accept a messaging platform like this, in exchange for lower premiums? Digital advertising can be targeted to people's aspirations; could we do the same with health messaging, using the desire to find a mate, look 10 years younger, or get into a swimsuit as personal motivation for good health?

The technological possibilities are endless. Consumers are increasingly online and engaged. With the right approach, we can create new model of healthcare delivery, moving care from the hospital or doctor's office into patients' everyday lives.

Joe Kvedar, M.D., is vice president of Connected Health at Partners HealthCare and the author of "The Internet of Healthy Things."

athenainsight

A daily news hub reporting from the heart of the health care internet, with access to a comprehensive data set of health care transactions from athenahealth's nationwide network. We equip leaders with actionable insight and inspiration for making health care work as it should.

Stay in the know

Sign up for weekly data and news:
insight.athenahealth.com/newsletter