



4 healthcare predictions for 2019

By Lia Novotny | December 11, 2018

As 2018 draws to a close, athenaInsight asked three healthcare leaders to share their predictions for the coming year. They all agreed on one thing: 2019 will be a year of strategic thinking to make technology work harder, smarter, and better. Innovation and strategy will unite to pave the way for organizational efficiency and stronger patient engagement.

Machine learning will optimize workflows

John Halamka, M.D., CIO of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC), believes that traditional analytic methods, such as business intelligence or big data, will soon be replaced by machine learning. By applying computer-generated algorithms to the past experiences of millions of patients, hospitals and health systems will be able to recommend more successful treatment plans and predict patient behavior and outcomes.

This new approach to big data is no longer speculative – it works today. “In 2019, BIDMC will be using machine learning analysis to optimize our operating room schedules, forecast length of patient stays, and predict who is likely to miss an ambulatory appointment,” he says. These workflow improvements will add up to lower costs and more personalized, patient-centered care.



John Halamka, MD, CIO

Beyond 2019, Halamka sees the potential for even bigger machine learning projects that support clinical decision-making, such as identifying patients at risk for rehospitalization or predicting at admission which emergency-department patients will need the ICU and for how long. Still, Halamka doesn't envision a future in which clinicians are made obsolete. “Artificial intelligence will not replace clinicians; it will augment them,” he says.

AI relies on high quality data. “The better the data, the better the machine learning algorithms, and the more likely it is that we will be able to leverage past data to drive future success,” he says. Today’s data is often incomplete and unstructured. As this improves in coming years, machine learning will only become more valuable to healthcare.

Technology will also make back-office functions run more smoothly

2019 will continue to see healthcare organizations needing to do more with less, and they’ll look to Enterprise Resource Planning systems (ERPs) to provide necessary cost-cutting and operational efficiency. This technology will help automate back-office functions, better track resources, and integrate administrative functions across the organization, with a focus on improving speed.



David Chou

“I see organizations trying to do things better, faster, and cheaper,” says David Chou, chief information and digital officer at Children’s Mercy Kansas City. “That’s where the focus is going to be.” Chou believes major healthcare systems and small practices alike will be studying how ERPs

can streamline their business practices and free up resources to support their strategic initiatives.

Consumer-driven patient engagement will continue

Patient engagement will continue to be critical to better financial and healthcare outcomes, and patients will continue to demand a more consumer-driven experience on par with banking or online shopping.

Geeta Nayyar, M.D., chief healthcare and innovation officer of Femwell Group Health and TopLine MD Health Alliance, one of the largest management

services organizations (MSO) in the state of Florida, contends, “just like every other industry, healthcare is going to evolve into a consumer model – the consumer will be in the driver’s seat. So you’ll see healthcare organizations making big investments in patient engagement technology.”

Chou agrees that more healthcare organizations will be investing in consumer-facing tools and applications. “People want to create a similar experience to what we have in retail, and they are working diligently toward that goal – it’s one of the big macro trends I see coming.”



Geeta Nayyar, M.D.

This shift may happen even faster as outside disruptors like Amazon and Apple extend their footprints in the healthcare space. These retail players know a lot about direct-to-consumer services and are likely to drive healthcare further, and faster, in that direction. Nayyar can already imagine a world in which “Amazon creates a one-stop virtual shop, connected to a brick-and-mortar practice, where I can do a virtual visit, have my medication sent to me, and get a reminder that I haven’t had my mammogram.” Although that future is likely more than a year off, the promise of it will begin to raise the bar on patient expectations.

However, while the big retailers are masters of consumer engagement, they still lack expertise in healthcare. For that reason, Nayyar cautions against irrational exuberance. “Their strategy needs to include a lot of partnerships with a lot of the healthcare players if they’re truly going to do it right.”

Telehealth adoption will increase and new options will emerge

“We have a simple supply-and-demand issue,” says Nayyar. “There are not enough specialist doctors to meet patient demand. If it can be done virtually, really the question is, ‘Why not?’”

The proposed CMS changes for telehealth reimbursement are a start. The broader umbrella of “Communication Technology” will allow healthcare organizations to think beyond just virtual visits to include mobile check-ins and push notifications, remote monitoring, preventive services, records reviews, and more – beginning the shift from telehealth to a true virtual care model.

Telehealth will continue to expand as an option for treating common, simple conditions that can easily be resolved with a course of medication. But experts also see telehealth expanding more and more into the preventive care arena. They envision physicians having brief check-ins with chronically ill patients as part of a comprehensive care plan. Chou sees telehealth as “a prime technology to allow healthcare organizations to keep patients out of the hospital. It will be driving population health.”

But Chou also cautions against making telehealth an end unto itself. “Telehealth is just one of a set of tools and service offerings that can provide a better experience, better outcomes, and hopefully drive patient loyalty and engagement.”

Lia Novotny is a Contributing Editor to athenaInsight

athenainsight

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

Stay in the know

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