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The future of clinicians in the era of consumer-centric health

Empowered by new technologies, patients and their physicians can become better at shared decision-making by embracing a health care transformation that is at their doorstep

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Introduction

The combination of health apps, always-on sensors, and wearable devices has led to an explosion of health data.[1] About 60% of households own a wearable device, and 87% of wearable owners use them to track health metrics like heart rate, workout duration, and sleep quality, according to Deloitte research.[2] This information, when combined with artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies, could empower consumers to make complex decisions about their own health (see *The dawn of a new health CEO: The role of the consumer in the Future of Health*). These same technologies could also empower physicians, likely enabling improvements in patient services, care outcomes, and patient-physician dynamics. With these shifts, the role of the physician will likely evolve beyond the four walls of the doctor's office, presenting potential opportunities for innovation and improvements in care.

Access to better health data may improve shared decision-making

Consumers have access to vast amounts of health information and increasingly sophisticated digital tools (see Integrating digital health tools to help improve the whole consumer experience). Armed with research and data, patients can come to appointments with preconceived hypotheses about their diagnoses and treatment options. However, it can be difficult for consumers to distinguish accurate and useful information from data that might be incomplete, misleading, or false. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many consumers were saturated with both accurate and inaccurate information about prevention and treatments. Misinformation in health care has been called "a critical illness requiring treatment."[3]

Charting a patient's individual health journey often requires deep insight into that specific patient's physiology, pharmacology, and social drivers of health (see Addressing the drivers of health). Physicians, equipped with years of medical school, residency, and intensive training, are generally well positioned to help decipher complex health data and advise patients to make the most appropriate decisions about their health (see Rebuilding trust in health care). Unlike corporations, physicians have a fiduciary duty to protect patients' best interests, requiring them to elevate their conduct above that of commercial actors.[4] Without this important protection, patients could be vulnerable to predatory marketing and be influenced to pursue treatments with little evidence for efficacy.

Increased access to information may fundamentally shift dynamics between patients and providers away from authoritative advice and toward more collaborative decision-making, which has been shown to improve outcomes.[5]

Technology can dramatically enhance care operations

Emerging technologies are already having an impact on care delivery (see Restoring purpose in health care). AI data tools are beginning to make their way into health systems and physician offices (see From fax machines to GenAI, are hospitals/health systems ready?), and evidence is showing that these tools have the potential to drastically reduce the time it takes to perform administrative tasks. As a result, physicians may be able to spend more time with patients, which could improve patients' experience and quality of care.

Some studies have shown that providers in hospital intensive care units may spend as little as 15% to 30% of their time with patients,[6] sometimes dedicating the rest of their time to more mundane duties like updating medical records. Advances in AI tools are creating opportunities for clinicians to streamline these administrative tasks to devote more time to patient care, while reducing burnout (see How AI can help hospitals strengthen their financial performance and reduce clinician burnout). Spending more time with patients could allow for more meaningful conversations and interactions, which can benefit patients as well as physicians. A majority of surveyed consumers say they want a personal relationship with a physician who listens to them, makes informed decisions, and offers clear communication (see Are consumers already living the Future of Health?). In addition to their ability to interpret data, physicians can offer a healing touch that cannot be replicated by technology.[7] As technology evolves, the patient-physician dynamic may improve as efficiencies in care delivery could result in more touchpoints with patients and help enable physicians to build stronger relationships.

AI, data, and clinical decision-making

With the onset of artificial intelligence and Generative AI, technology has the potential to improve more than just physicians' workflow. These tools have the ability to use algorithmic data to support clinical decision-making. For example, AI can be used to leverage vast amounts of patient data to deliver earlier and more accurate diagnoses.[8] AI can also augment clinical services and reduce physician mistakes by leveraging algorithms to create personalized treatment plans, thereby potentially reducing the risk of adverse events.[9]

Concerns have been raised about the accuracy of AI-generated content as well as algorithms based on irrelevant or incomplete datasets. Case in point: Early this year, a group of physicians and researchers urged the US Food and Drug Administration to issue guidance on the use of AI-generated clinical notes. They warned that some large language models used to summarize clinical notes could lead to "unpredictable effects on clinician decision-making."[10] Physicians, they said, should review the accuracy and context of summaries to avoid diagnostic errors. In medicine, as in any field, decisions based on algorithms can be subject to errors and biases in the datasets themselves. For example, algorithms built on data from a population in rural Idaho could generate inaccurate guidance for a population from urban New York City.

The influx of data from wearables may present another challenge for both care operations and decision-making. Some physicians have expressed concerns about the overwhelming volume of health data that could be transmitted to electronic medical records (EMRs) from fitness trackers, smartwatches, and other wearable devices (see Data utility and accuracy key to physicians' use of wearable tech for health care). Some patients may rely on physicians to monitor and interpret this information.

One way to help address this challenge could be to implement an AI analytics layer that helps to filter data from wearables. This layer could use algorithms to assess the relevance and urgency of the data before alerting the appropriate members of the care team. In this approach, only pertinent information that requires attention should prompt action from the most appropriate member of the care team (e.g., the patient, care manager, nurse, or physician) depending on the nature and urgency of the event. This targeted approach could help ensure that physicians are not overloaded with data but are informed about critical health metrics that require their expertise.

Because health data is highly personal, it is important that physicians who choose to leverage AI learn to interpret health data and stay fluent in modern AI tools to support clinical decision-making and continue to provide quality care to their patients. The American College of Physicians recommends AI training for physicians "at all levels of education and practice."[11] Moreover, some medical students are being trained in data science so that they can more effectively interpret data to improve their medical knowledge as well as the care that they offer patients.[12]

AI's potential to enable more efficient health care delivery and improve clinical decision-making could transform patient care. However, reaping the potential benefits of these tools will tend to rely on physicians' ability to understand the proper uses and risks of these innovative technologies. As technology matures, the physician's role could shift from leveraging insights from their training to incorporating insights from technology. Patients and physicians may both need to learn to approach health decisions through a new lens in the context of a world empowered by AI.

Conclusion

Five years ago, Deloitte issued its *Future of Health™ report*, which outlined a path health care is likely to follow over the next 10 or 20 years. As predicted, consumers are gaining access to comprehensive information about their own health and are beginning to play a central role in decision-making about their care and well-being (see *Navigating the Future of Health™ in an era of change*). This could change the role of physicians, but these potential changes can be beneficial to both patients and providers. Empowered by new technologies, both patients and their physicians can embrace this industry transformation and embark on a shared journey toward a future of health that seeks to put patient wellness at the center and position physicians as a trusted adviser.

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