
WHEN HIGH TECH MEETS HIGH TOUCH

Can It Click in the Continuum Of Care?

Much has been written about the connection between physician and patient during an in-person visit. But what exactly is at the core of that connection? It's an innate need to develop rapport with others. Evidence of this need dates back to 30,000 BC in cave paintings, a form of communicating warnings and celebrating victories. Today, our connections can be tangible or virtual. For healthcare providers, creating a virtual environment that is both warm and welcoming, has been a challenge.

Enter the digital front door, a full, 360-degree, 24/7 virtual experience that can help establish sustained relationships and encourage interaction. While it may seem like high tech is in direct opposition to high touch, nothing is further from the truth. Technology empowers providers to make patient care better and more accessible exactly where it matters – wherever people are.

A rock-solid digital strategy encourages providers to support various touchpoints in the patient's healthcare journey. In addition, it can streamline provider interactions so that much of pre-appointment information sharing is automated. This saves time for both sides and facilitates the delivery of more attentive care.

The promise of quality virtual care has for years been just that—a promise. Then came the pandemic, which forced a reality check by healthcare organizations worldwide. Infrastructure limitations and geography were no longer acceptable inconveniences for consumers seeking care.

To be sure, many providers have already implemented tools that blur the line between the virtual and physical worlds. Secure, self-service portals are now the norm, enabling patients to leverage web functionality to obtain health information and find accessible care. Moving forward, even more exotic forms of technology -- virtual reality and artificial intelligence among them – will make significant strides to connect high tech with high touch.

CONUNDRUM, OR CONNECTION?

Providers are now beginning to understand that medicine won't always be a face-to-face experience. By offering various ways for patients to connect with them and facilitate treatment on their terms, high tech can help build patient loyalty.

The 2020 Change Healthcare - Harris Poll Consumer Experience Index found that across all phases of the healthcare journey, consumers are seeking more modern, digital communication from both providers and payers. The majority say they want their healthcare provider (68%) and health insurance plan (71%) to communicate with them using more contemporary platforms. Only one in three say their healthcare provider (33%) or insurance plan (35%) communicates with them too much.

Healthcare communications has already become more personalized by combining patient preference with technology tools. Today, patients can choose how they want to receive communication -- by phone, text, email, web or medical device. Through their preferred channel, specific interventions can be delivered to remind them about upcoming appointments, obtain medication refills, encourage them to contact a health coach for assistance, and more. The right protocols can complement other forms of outreach to ensure patients get the care they need, when they need it. And that's just what the doctor ordered.



The Harris Poll also found that many consumers believe the communication ecosystem could be entirely digital. Fully 63% indicated that it would be acceptable if all communications from their health insurance plan were digital, while 58% stated the same about communications with their healthcare provider. Surprisingly, an equal percentage state this would actually make things easier.

That's not to say that healthcare delivery can lack human connection. Researchers at the University of California's School of Public Health found that eye contact and a simple pat on the back from the doctor may boost the survival rate of patients with complex diseases.

However, the way in which a physician communicates in a virtual setting matters greatly. The Deloitte 2020 Survey of US Health Care Consumers found that among consumers who would not schedule another virtual care visit, one in five said they didn't like the way they were treated. In short, "bedside" manner matters.

Similarly, Accenture's 2020 Digital Health Consumer Survey found that 52% of consumers who have a primary care physician (PCP) agreed that a bad digital experience with a provider ruins the experience overall. This compares to 42% of those without a PCP. Consumers expect virtual visits to be of high quality with clinicians who listen, take their time and treat them well.

FOR PATIENTS, IT'S PERSONAL

High-tech healthcare doesn't have to sacrifice high-touch relationships. Both can co-exist, and together, jointly enhance the patient experience. It begins by allowing patients to be equal partners in their care. People are eager to find constructive providers who allow them to feel seen, heard and respected. In the digital world, this translates to virtual care that's delivered with kindness.

Integrating personal attention with technology can deliver a multi-faceted approach to treatment that keeps patients on the path to better health. Care Managers, for example, can effectively bridge the gap between in-person and virtual care by helping patients understand their conditions and options. They can help coordinate specialist appointments, remotely monitor medication compliance and support lifestyle changes. For people living with complex and chronic conditions, certified health professionals such as nurses, social workers, dietitians and behavioral health specialists, offer a lifeline.

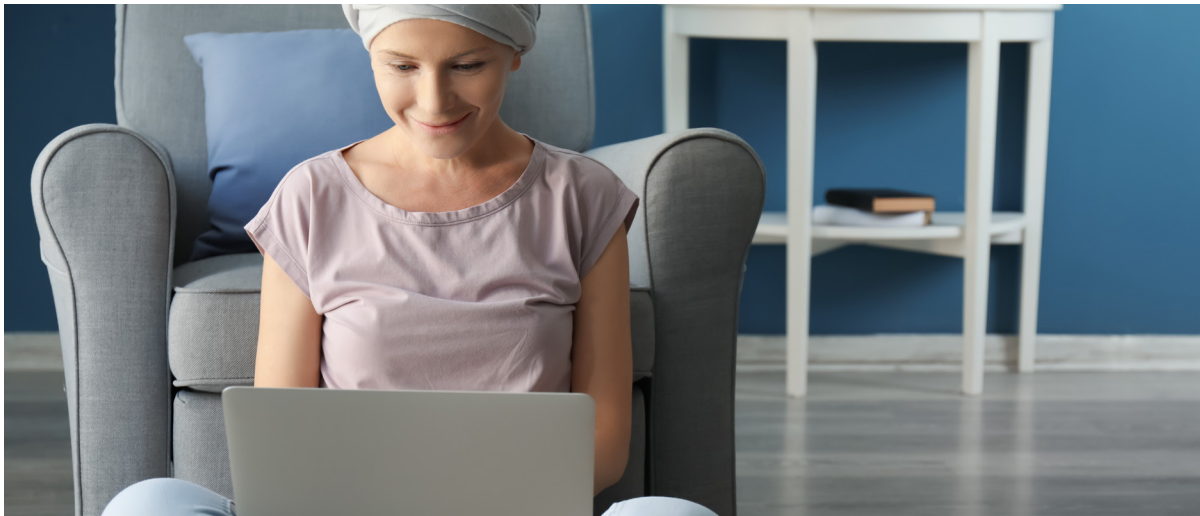


Meaningful connections can also be established between care recipients and their digital health aides. The mainstreaming of voice-based devices in the home, which are easy to set up and use, are now helping close a clinical gap. Programmable voice assistants can proactively facilitate caregiver check-ins and answer health questions remotely. Ultimately, these devices open the door for more beneficial and satisfying follow-on provider interactions.

Digital health aides can alleviate some of the more tedious day-to-day tasks of care, too. Caregivers are most accepting of virtual support when it's rooted in delivering, monitoring and tracking the care plan of their loved ones. Improving the quality of time that family members spend together often restores the emotional bonds strained by illness. The outcome is a holistic approach to family wellness.

But is the most basic element of high touch care -- empathy -- viable in virtual communication? The answer is yes. Recently, emergency care clinicians at Stanford University School of Medicine used tablets to video conference with patients coping with the pandemic. These physicians found that personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, face shields and scrubs severely hampered their ability to build trust and rapport with patients. By using tablet technology, they could remove PPE and demonstrate empathy at a time when patients need it most.

Telemedicine can potentially offer a better patient-doctor bond and more meaningful visits. A Massachusetts General Hospital study found that patients reported strong personal connections with providers when using telehealth. Some 62% of patients said the quality of telehealth visits was as good as in-person visits, while 21% said it was even better. Given that some new Medicare rules for reimbursement mandate a visit minimum of 20 minutes, it's clear that telemedicine can help deliver what many patients value most -- uninterrupted time with their provider.



HOPE ON THE HORIZON

Video conferencing is the starting point for many virtual visits, but its ability to support a more diverse virtual care model is limited. Technology, however, brings hope when treatment requires a closer connection. For example, the Department of Dermatology at University of Virginia is experimenting with an advanced form of telemedicine using equipment that allows doctors to virtually touch and feel skin lesions on patients located at a distance. The department also plans to launch a clinical trial with technology that photographs suspicious skin lesions and uses artificial intelligence (AI) to calculate their risk of being cancerous.

Telehealth is also playing an important role in physical therapy by using virtual reality (VR). In some cases, medical VR involves the now-familiar headset. In others, 3D glasses and special video screens give a VR-like experience. Nowhere has this technology been more effective than in pain management.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 20.4% of U.S. adults experienced chronic pain in 2019. For them, virtual reality is a safer, more efficient alternative to medicines. Inside the VR arena, patients can have direct communication with their clinician, meet with support groups, or play video games that help distract them from their pain. Information is gathered and transmitted back to the clinician, who charts the patient's progress. In some cases, clients can even chart their own progress via an app.



VR technology is also being used to treat everything from anxiety to post-traumatic stress disorder. In stroke patients, VR helps them overcome balance and mobility problems. For those serving the senior population, VR can be used to enhance existing high-touch patient protocols. High tech enables the care team to be more actively involved in the senior's life and in tune with their unique needs.

For providers, VR can contribute greatly to an enriched patient experience. A heads-up display allows them to access a patient's medical records without having to turn away from the patient to use a computer. Remote transcription services are already in use allowing the physician to focus on the patient while someone else updates their medical records.

Another telehealth tool currently growing in acceptance is the chatbot. Chatbots are software applications used to conduct an on-line chat via text or voice in lieu of direct contact with live agent. The pandemic and social distancing have prompted more health systems to explore and apply automated chatbots.

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