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## Consumer-Centric Healthcare

*Consumer-focused initiatives offer opportunities and challenges for providers.*

Consumer-centric healthcare initiatives have never been more important. Healthcare executives must keep the consumer's perspective in mind—including baby boomers and generations X and Y—when evaluating the direction for new programs, partnering initiatives and planning for their organizations.

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In our book, *Consumer-Centric Healthcare: Opportunities and Challenges for Providers* (Health Administration Press, 2010), we focus on initiatives that are transforming how the healthcare industry is meeting consumer needs. In this article, we highlight three

topics: patient portals and personal health records (PHRs), telemedicine and mobile health (mHealth).

### **Patient Portals and PHRs: Window to Your Health Data**

Patient portals and PHRs provide consumers with a window to their health, serving as patient-managed archives of their health data. Portals are online applications that patients can use to interact electronically with their care providers through secure health information technology (HIT) systems.

Consumers and provider organizations have been slow to adopt these technologies. Key issues that have slowed adoption for providers include incompatible systems, inconsistent data standards and policy fragmentation. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Meaningful Use for EHRs Stage 2 criteria, however, which are expected to be implemented by CMS in 2014, are predicted to drive stronger requirements for hospitals and providers to make patients' health data more accessible and increase the demand for portal capabilities.

Providers also need to increase consumer confidence in health

information security to reinforce health data privacy concerns. In addition, HIT vendors need to continue to work toward integration of PHR systems with their EHR systems to speed adoption by health systems. Opportunities to increase adoption of PHRs and portals by consumers include continued patient education across demographic segments, industry-wide strengthening of data security measures that reduce vulnerabilities of data breaches, and increased buy-in from providers to support marketing efforts that increase consumer adoption.

### **Telemedicine: Improving Patient Access**

Telemedicine technologies serve key purposes such as remote monitoring, real-time communications, and storage and forwarding of information. As the nation grapples with the rising cost of care, telemedicine can reduce the cost of accessing care for consumers and improve the quality of

care through more convenient interactions between patients and providers.

In 2010, global sales of telehealth equipment were reported at \$163.3 million, of which \$122 million was in North and South America; forecasts project this global market ballooning to \$6.23 billion by 2020, according to a 2011 article in *InformationWeek*. The aging of the baby boomer population will also drive increased use of telemedicine, especially as the need for home care increases during the coming decades.

One example of increased use of telemedicine comes from BayCare Health System’s home care services in Clearwater, Fla., which was described in a 2008 article from the *Journal of Healthcare Information Management*. From January to December 2007, a small group of BayCare patients received home telemonitoring systems that allowed them to video conference with care providers. The devices also integrated data from blood pressure devices and weight scales for daily recording of measurements. As a result, patients in this group had fewer hospitalizations and rehospitalizations and higher compliance with oral medications than patients not receiving the home telemonitoring.

Consumers and healthcare organizations have experienced similar benefits, especially in rural areas where rural and critical access hospitals use telemedicine to access specialists and primary

care physicians because on-site physician supply is low. Another trend is the increased use of mobile health clinics equipped with video conferencing, PHRs and other devices used to improve patient compliance, monitoring and communications with care providers. The elderly and chronically ill are key demographic segments that will continue to benefit from advances with these tools.

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**Mobile Health Applications: Driving New Connectivity**

The expansion and strengthening of broadband access throughout the United States and globally has supported the growing use of smartphones and other wireless devices that enable consumer use of mobile health applications. More than 200 million mHealth applications are in use globally, and this number is expected to grow rapidly in future years. These applications are tailored for consumers for both wellness needs and chronic disease management.

In light of the potential impact on patient safety, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released in 2011 draft guidelines for oversight of mHealth applications that “are used as an accessory

to medical device(s) already regulated by the FDA” or that “transform a mobile communications device into a regulated medical device by using attachments, sensors or other devices.”

While the development of mHealth applications appears robust for years to come, barriers need to be addressed to maximize the positive impact for consumers and their organizations. In 2011, the World Health Organization noted the top three global barriers for effective mHealth program implementation are competing health system priorities; knowledge (e.g., evidence to support impact on outcomes); and policies that establish mHealth initiatives as approaches to dealing with regional health issues.

One example of an organization that has established an mHealth initiative is Cancer Care Ontario (CCO), a government agency responsible for managing cancer and other chronic diseases in Ontario, Canada. In 2010, CCO developed an mHealth application that assesses the clinical status of palliative care patients.

Starting with best practice guidelines (and no patient information), the new application was developed in two months. Within four months, it had more than 1,000 downloads around the world. Understanding utilization was essential for further application refinement, the development team embedded analytics in the application to capture greater insight on the tool’s usage.

### Strategies for the C-Suite

To maximize the impact of consumer-centric initiatives, healthcare executives should consider these strategies:

- Use executive communications to ensure stakeholders are

aware of consumer-centric programs and technologies available, benefits derived and advantages for consumers who need them

- Measure effectiveness of existing programs and evaluate new

consumer-centric technologies (e.g., remote monitoring, patient-caregiver communications, remote testing, etc.) that can meet patient needs and improve ease of use for consumers

- Establish strong policies and programs on health data security that ensure continuous monitoring to prevent security breaches that can erode consumer trust
- Synchronize eHealth (electronic health) and mHealth initiatives. As consumers continue to increase their connectivity, ensure that mHealth applications are in place to strengthen relationships

Today's healthcare industry is transitioning from a volume-driven to a quality- and performance-driven model of care. As this transition occurs, monitoring trends in these consumer-centric areas will be essential for improving the quality of care delivered in our communities and across the globe. ▲

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