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Featured Article

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How Technology Can Help Overburdened Doctors and Combat the Great Resignation in Health Care

Even before the pandemic, the United States was already facing a physician shortage¹, beginning in the early 2000s, that many described as "devastating." Doctors faced long hours, regulatory compliance, high malpractice insurance premiums, mountains of paperwork that kept them in the office well after closing hours and increasing medical school debt (which mostly won't be covered² by the new student loan forgiveness program).

Indeed, the Covid-19 crisis exacerbated an already worrisome problem. During the pandemic, the lives of physicians became even more strained as they dealt with sick and dying patients, the lack of PPE and hospital beds, mixed communications about Covid and its spread, patient fear and their own anxieties about becoming infected.

Nearly three years into the pandemic, we have vaccines proven to prevent and mitigate Covid in its various iterations, schools are returning to maskless classrooms, people are setting sail on cruise ships, and living with the virus has become the new normal. However, in the wake of Covid's destruction, doctors are exhausted, depressed and stressed. Some are considering a career change. According to a study³ conducted by the Mayo Clinic and funded by the American Medical Association (AMA), one in five doctors plans to leave their medical practice by the end of 2023, and one in three will be reducing their hours by the end of 2022.

The Great Medical Resignation⁴ is upon us. The AMA recommends solutions that include providing better support to doctors as parents and caretakers and making them feel more valued in their roles. But technology, which eliminates some of the minutiae of the doctor's day-to-day tasks, can also play an important role in reducing the heavy burden doctors carry. Here's how:

Virtual meetings with pharma reps

Anyone who has been to a doctor's office is familiar with the ubiquitous sight of the pharma rep⁵ outfitted with their rolling sample cart and waiting patiently for a minute of the doctor's time. They would wait for hours and barely get a minute. Then the pandemic struck. All of the major pharmaceutical companies⁶ sent their reps home to work remotely. Although reps can once again trolley their sample carts to doctors' offices, both physicians and reps have discovered that virtual visits lead to more meaningful and fruitful conversations. And by meeting with reps virtually, doctors can schedule times that work best for them and spend more time in virtual meetings than in-person meetings.

There are now communication platforms that allow doctors to communicate directly with pharma companies in a compliant way. Communication can be as simple as a text message, which is convenient for a doctor who has a quick question about a drug and is in between patients. They don't need to spend time sitting down and logging in, and they can be assured that their messaging is privileged and encrypted.

Global Date Healthcare reports that physicians overwhelmingly prefer video conferencing to in-person meetings. A 2021 poll⁷ showed that 75% of healthcare professionals prefer virtual or a mix of virtual and in-person meetings. The pandemic wave of digital transformation⁸ has permanently changed the way the pharmaceutical industry is doing business.

Telehealth and quantum computing

According to the 2021 McKinsey Physician Survey⁹, 88% said they have used telehealth at one point during the pandemic. The survey also says that while there was an upsurge in telehealth during the pandemic, it has abated with consumers using digital platforms at 38% higher than pre-pandemic numbers. But as with the changes for pharma reps, the public's comfort level with utilizing telemedicine¹⁰ has grown. This is particularly true for patients seeking mental health care. A 2022 report¹¹ from the Kaiser Family Foundation showed that 36% of those seeking care for mental health and substance abuse disorders rely on telehealth today.

Without even realizing it, patients are fast becoming adept consumers of digital medicine, which will continue to evolve as quantum computing¹² takes center stage in the medical world. With lighting-speed capabilities, quantum computing will be able to conduct "in silico" diagnoses, completing a full genetic scan and simulacrum of a patient virtually. Within a decade, it's possible that quantum computing can create personalized drugs for patients — without ever needing to see the patient in person.

Hub services

Back from the future, doctors must still contend with prescribing specialty drugs in a byzantine system that is complex, sluggish, and costly. Specialty drugs derive from living cells and treat chronic complex diseases like cancer and rheumatoid arthritis (e.g., Keytruda for lung cancer). Specialty drugs have been on the market since the 1990s, when there were just 30 drugs available. Today, there are more than 500. The IQVIA Institute¹³ predicts that by 2023, 65% of new pharma products will be specialty drugs.

Hub services¹⁴ are a boon for the specialty drug boom. As the name implies, hub services centralize the required data — including patient history, drug specifications, compliance requirements and insurance information — in one place, making the administration of a complex process more manageable.

QR codes, chatbots and AI

Digital technology leads to better outcomes for both patients and healthcare providers. Doctors are not trained to be tech-savvy, but fortunately, tech has become more savvy and user-friendly. QR codes¹⁵ ("quick response"), invented in 1994, were initially used in marketing. Now, 30 years later, they are widely used in medical brochures, magazines and even patient charts. A 2020 Deloitte survey¹⁶ shows that patients are now more comfortable sharing their medical data, creating a pathway for digital trust in using QR codes.

Patients are also becoming more acclimated to conversing with AI-driven chatbots¹⁷ that use machine learning and have the ability to become more intelligent. Chatbots reduce the doctor's load by quickly and correctly answering questions that could interrupt a doctor's busy schedule. They also add a layer of privacy for delicate questions about things like genital warts or colonoscopy prep that might embarrass a patient.

AI-based technologies¹⁸ continue to make healthcare better every day — from their utilization in administrative tasks to drug development to predictive analytics. These technologies will not replace doctors but will make doctors more efficient as well as lighten the heavy loads they are carrying. And with the shocking and sharp decline in life expectancy in the U.S¹⁹., we need our doctors to be at their best now more than ever.

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