

Digital health: snake oil or an unbeaten path? A systems approach.

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I was concerned by Dr. James Madara, the head of the American Medical Association's comments regarding digital snake oil.

I was even more concerned with the standing applause the comments received at the annual conference in 2016.

Now I know the applause of one room doesn't dictate that all physicians believe that digital health is 21st century snake oil. But it did raise my concern level to ask a question:

Do a majority of physicians believe digital health does more harm than good?

Thankfully, the vast majority of responses I received when I've asked physicians this question is positive. Digital health provides more good than harm. It has been very beneficial for research and future innovations, as well as in practice workflows. This is good news because consumers increasingly want their providers to embrace them with digital health resources. Especially my generation, the Millennials.

After hearing those responses, I took further study into understanding why AMA leadership would identify digital health as the digital snake oil of the 21st century.

The core challenge:

I think Dr. Madara's speech was his way of igniting a call to action to emphasize usability in early development of digital health solutions for providers. Providers want to improve the health of their patients. If a provider can't use the latest and greatest resources to help manage their patient's care because the provider has to disrupt the workflow of their 20+ patients a day practice to get intelligence from a solution that they may or may not use, we have a problem.

Unfortunately, that is a challenge in many practices today. But that challenge should be addressed through a team approach; putting emphasis on the practice management to develop a practical approach to the implementation of new solutions, engaging the providers early and often on the workflows of potential digital health products, identifying strategies to prepare the entire practice for a digital health implementation.

Usability of digital health for providers and clinical staff should be a priority for digital health solutions. It should have the same level of priority as expecting ROI. If an end-user cannot use the product to the best of its abilities, ROI will have a far less likely chance of ever being met.

The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act of 2009, a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), produced a multi-million-dollar professional development program to train a health information technology (IT) workforce to support clinical providers in the implementation and utilization of electronic medical records (EMRs). This training program was designed to aid in the implementation and usability of EMRs across the country. Medical providers would now be able to hire health IT professionals into their support teams to improve operational and clinical workflow.

But what about the provider workforce development? Study after study shows that providers continue to have operational challenges with EMRs, and feel that it reduces the provider's time to interact with their patients.

It would have been great to see a concentrated engagement focused in provider-led workflow simulation training of EMR platforms prior to purchase and installation, allowing providers and their clinical teams an opportunity to fully understand operational practice setting changes, allowing them to make necessary adjustments to their environments that would allow them to effectively implement digital health solutions that increase practice efficiency AND enhance provider usability.

This approach to digital health, a systems thinking approach to digital health, eliminates the idea of digital health as snake oil. Digital health is part of the unbeaten path in the future of healthcare delivery.