



PEOPLE & ORGANIZATIONS

## How To Avoid Health Care Information Overload

March 24th, 2016



## OVERVIEW

Today, we have vast amounts of information ready at the click of a button or touch of a screen. There has been a proliferation of health-related websites and apps purporting to offer everything from professional medical advice and tips on health insurance, to dubious, even risky, folklore remedies. At the same time, new technologies can give real-time readings and long-term trend assessments of our vital signs, including pulse rates, blood oxygen levels and more, with the promise of even more to come.

The growth of health care information and data is only going to continue, as there are strong signs of increasing consumer demand for better online advice and tools, according to the results of the 2016 Consumer Health Mindset™ Study conducted by Aon in partnership with the National Business Group on Health and The Futures Company. The study, now in its fifth year, found that digitally-savvy Millennials rely much more on self-directed learning—as well as social sharing and peer advice—than older age groups. As they enter the workforce, they are also increasingly looking for data-driven health care decision support tools from health insurance providers and their employers.

But is this desire for access to more information about our health making us wiser as individuals? And will we actually make better health care decisions based on the more personalized information that we gather?



## IN DEPTH

### **Changing Attitudes toward Health Care Information**

From Boomers to Millennials, all generations participating in the latest Consumer Health Mindset™ Study demonstrate an increased appreciation of digital tools designed to guide and inform them to make better decisions, with 68% finding health plan decision tools most helpful in choosing the right health insurance coverage, a seven percentage point rise on the 2014 study.

Doctors and nurses continue to be the top influencers on health matters across generations, with 63% of those surveyed saying they are most likely to follow advice from medical professionals on the health and wellness actions they take. But the survey also revealed Millennials are far more likely than older generations to research symptoms before a medical visit (82%), to bring lists of questions to a medical appointment (68%) and to bring information found to a medical visit (53%). At the same time, 41% of Millennials were more likely to rely on social networks to influence health actions than the advice of health care professionals. By comparison, only 23% of Boomers would allow social networks to influence their health actions, according to the study.

“Younger consumers are looking to bring together multiple sources to make decisions,” says Ray Baumruk, Partner, Employee Research and Insights, Engagement and Human Capital Measurement at Aon Hewitt. “These consumers review rating sites and get advice from their peers, and view these as more objective sources than marketing collateral from health care organizations. All companies in the health ecosystem have to adapt to this reality.”

This indicates a profound shift in consumer attitudes to health care that could have significant implications for not just the health care industry, but also employers – because a workforce that takes a proactive role in caring for its own health can have a significant impact on your bottom line.

“The Millennials are changing the game,” says Joann Hall Swenson, Partner, Health Best Practices Lead, Consumer Experience, Aon Hewitt. “They are looking for advice to ‘Help me look & feel my best.’ For them, being healthy is about looking and feeling good, spending time with family and friends, and finding balance.”

### **The Growth of Big Medical Data**

A recent report by the IMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics estimated there were over 165,000 medical apps in existence. According to IBM Watson Health, the volume of medical data being generated is expected to double every 73 days by 2020. But questions remain over whether this medical data is being integrated effectively.

According to the IMS Institute, most of today's medical apps (two thirds) are focused on general wellness issues like fitness, lifestyle, stress, and diet, while only 9 percent are focused on specific health conditions, 6 percent on medication information & reminders, and 7 percent on women's health & pregnancy.

Part of this trend is due to the rise of new technologies, like smart hearing aids , blood pressure monitors , infra-red pain relief devices and smart clothing with integral sensors woven into the fabric. But the IMS Institute noted that despite the ability to share data between IT systems, the percentage of apps that allow patients to share data securely has remained flat.

Improvements in the tools that gather, analyze and share health data and information hold potential to improve the overall health of the population and to help push down the rising costs of lifestyle-related diseases, so they could have a significant impact on the cost of health care.

There are multiple initiatives in this area, such as the Pittsburgh Health Data Alliance, which aims to take data from sources including medical and insurance records, wearable sensors, genetic databanks and social media to assist in personalizing health care packages. In January 2016, the clothing manufacturer Under Armour partnered with IBM to create the new UA Record, which aims to become an online health consultant, fitness trainer and assistant to wearers of its products. The goal is to providing timely, evidence-based coaching around sleep, fitness, activity and nutrition, including outcomes achieved based on similar individuals. Another company, Artefact, has designed an app called Chronicle, which will track an individual's chronic conditions, symptoms and actions in real time, and allow these to be compared with others for researchers to uncover new treatments.

### **What the Increase in Health Data Means for Health Care**

The potential impact of this vast volume of health care information on medicine itself is huge. Through big data analysis of the information being generated, scientists are able to compare and analyze more detailed information about the effects of treatments on patients with different medical histories, potentially leading to new cures, more personalized advice, better patient outcomes and all-round improved health care efficiency.

There is also a strong benefit for individuals. One recent study into the sharing of clinicians' notes with patients has shown that two-thirds of patients reported a better understanding of their health and medical conditions, took better care of themselves, adhered better to their medical prescriptions, and felt more in control of their care. Having access to this data – both from their official medical records and from connected devices – also means patients can act as their own data-generation and analytics hub, giving them confidence that they possess all of the relevant information they need when seeking specialist care or asking for second opinions.

"What consumers experience on their health care journey impacts the choices they make and how they view health care, says Hall Swenson. While they see a positive shift in health culture and support from employers, they still lack the confidence to be savvy day-to-day health care consumers."

However, there are some challenges. To maximize the effectiveness of this data, individuals will need to be willing to share it.

### **Privacy and Other Health Data Concerns**

The growth and expanded availability of health care data has potential to be highly disruptive, both to the insurance business and to employers.

In the workplace, encouraging the use of wearables could help your workforce to become healthier, more engaged and more productive – but there are also health and liability risks, should wearing lead to health conditions or distraction, such as when driving.

Wearables can also be useful for corroborating claims in personal injury cases and for monitoring and helping people return to work, thereby lowering claims costs.

The data collected through such devices could also have implications for assessing the effectiveness of corporate wellness programs and in determining insurance premiums for individuals based on real-time assessments of health risks.

This data in turn can create additional worries about the privacy of personal health data. "About half of consumers express concerns about how their personal health information might be used overall, by their employer, or by other companies," says Baumruk.

The massive amount of information to which individuals now have access has also led to the rise of self-diagnoses via on-line symptom searches. This trend has contributed to the emergence of a new condition called cyberchondria. This can sometimes lead to the development of psychosomatic complaints that lead to demands for unnecessary and potentially expensive diagnostic procedures.

The converse situation could also have patients making medical decisions on their own when they should be seeking a professional opinion. A Pew poll found 35 percent of Americans go online to figure out their medical condition or that of someone else. While 41% of these respondents said their doctor confirmed the self-diagnosis, 35% never visited a doctor to get a professional opinion. Meanwhile, about 18% of people who did see a physician learned their self-diagnosis was incorrect.

### **Providing the Right Information in the Right Way**

Another key finding of the Consumer Health Mindset™ Study was that information from health insurers and employers has a bigger impact on consumer actions when backed up by strong communication, with 57 percent of respondents saying that employers should provide tools to give health information. The study also found that a company's effectiveness at health communications and health and fitness programs helps employees and potential employees feel better about the company.

To prevent costly misdiagnosis and to encourage healthier lifestyles, it is increasingly important for employers, health care providers and insurers alike to address this growing trend towards greater consumer demand for health care-related information.

"Today, consumers are more likely to value nearly every type of tool including provider choice tools, cost clarity tools, and health plan decision tools," says Baumruk, "So making sure these tools are easily accessed and can provide relevant guidance will be critical."

With health care costs rising globally – the average cost of employer-sponsored health care plans set to rise by 9.1 percent in 2016, according to recent Aon research – big data can become a resource for employers and employees to share in fine-tuning a personalized approach to well-being. This is not just a matter of good health. It is also good business.



## **TALKING POINTS**



"Insurers and employers should focus on creating hyper-relevant communication that draws consumers' attention to the information that matters most – develop targeted programs and messaging to the parts of your population who have the most to gain and can create the most impact if they make changes. To reach all your employees, keep messages short, simple, and relatable, and pilot test them in advance" – Aon Consumer Health Mindset™ Study



"There's this confluence of events. There's mobile, social obviously, and cloud-based solutions that are evolving so we are actually getting at the individual, and getting at their behavior data, and their biometric and even their genomic data. But it's even more than that. It's the hardware. We'll have nano sensors in our body, and we'll be able to detect markers ahead of actually getting a disease. It's a really exciting time." – Stephanie Tilenius, founder, Vida Health



"Data can... be used to predict future risks and outcomes. There's a lot of historical data available that can be used to predict the risk of someone having to be admitted to hospital in the next 12 months... In effect, it's providing proactive, rather than reactive, health care." – John Crawford, Health care Leader, Europe,

IBM

---

## FURTHER READING

- How Can We Provide Access To Better Health care Data For Consumers? – MedCity News, March 7, 2016
- Can Big Data Analytics Save Billions in Health care Costs? – Forbes, February 22, 2016
- Health care Sector Warned To Be Alert For Hack Attacks Of Networks And Devices – Financial Times, March 2, 2016
- Despite Breaches, Patients Trust Health care With Info – Health care IT News, January 28, 2016
- Are Wearables Helping The Right People? – Huffington Post UK, February 26, 2016
- 6 New Wearables That Promise To Make You Healthier – January 7, 2016

