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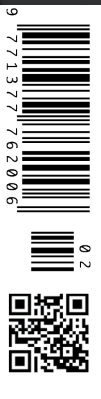
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Consumerism in Healthcare – Current Status, Benefits and Challenges

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The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed healthcare to move towards consumerism. This change is being driven by patients who are quickly turning into consumers. Where will this trend lead? Is it time for hospitals and consumers to work together to utilise digital technology in healthcare and to improve healthcare access across all groups of society? How can healthcare embrace consumerism?



Key Points

- Healthcare is fast becoming consumerised, with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic fuelling the fire.
- This trend of consumerism is being driven by patients. They will decide who will have access to their personal data. This would be mainly driven by brand trust and perceived value.
- New communication channels, especially digital ones, need to be created to maintain two-way conversations. Communities will play a significant role.
- Consumer-centred healthcare is heavily reliant on digital technology.
- Telehealth is breaking down the geographical proximity advantage and opening the field for increased competition with virtual competitors.
- With easy access to self-monitoring tools, patients are now demanding healthcare services that can leverage these tools and help them in managing their health.
- Marketing needs for healthcare providers must be redefined, adjusting strategy to this emerging target segment that has different needs and is looking for completely different solutions.

The idea of consumerism really took off in the early twentieth century when it was the need of the hour for the survival of businesses. Since then, the wagon of consumerism has never stopped. We live in times when even healthcare is fast becoming “consumerised.” The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has only fuelled this fire.

Consumerism in healthcare is not merely about supporting hospitals, insurance companies and other businesses. Instead, it is being driven by patients, who are increasingly turning into consumers. Furthermore, consumer-centred healthcare is becoming heavily reliant on digital technology. This rings especially true when we look at how the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed healthcare.

To put this into perspective, let us look at a statistic. Over 73% of the users employing digital healthcare tools, such as

artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots and telehealth, to monitor their health in the COVID-19 era are first-timers. The stage is set for a radical change in the way healthcare services will be consumed in the future, in Europe and elsewhere.

Adoption of Telehealth is Fuelling Consumerism

Significant changes in the healthcare landscape are already conspicuous. Many healthcare systems around the world have embraced telehealth to ensure social distancing. Regions like China, the U.S. and Europe are experiencing an unprecedented surge in the number of consumers demanding virtual healthcare. To keep up with this demand, several digital healthcare platforms are being offered in European nations. The increasing acceptance of telehealth is keeping both doctors and patients safe and setting

Europe on a fruitful path. At the same time, telehealth is breaking down the traditional “geographical proximity” advantage for some healthcare providers and opening the field for increased competition with virtual competitors. All these changes are fuelling consumerism in healthcare.

Self-Monitoring and Consumer Awareness

Self-monitoring, another catalyst in the transformation of healthcare, is not as difficult as it was once touted to be. More and more people are buying self-monitoring medical devices online. Pulse oximeters, devices that few had even heard of before the past couple of months, are now being sold at unusual rates. With these tiny hand-held devices, people can measure their oxygen saturation levels at home. Self-monitoring and online reporting are not limited to COVID-19. They can easily encompass a host of other health conditions, including many chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, many types of lung diseases etc. With these self-monitoring tools in hand, patients are now demanding healthcare services that can leverage these tools and help them in managing their health.

should be a happy balance between overtreatment and limited accessibility to medical facilities, two problems on the opposite extremes of a spectrum. Undoubtedly, now is the time for hospitals and patients to realise the power consumerism has to revolutionise healthcare, both during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

These are four things hospitals and healthcare providers can consider doing:

- **Focus on experience management:** This is an aspect of consumerism that can simply not be ignored is the consumer experience. In the context of healthcare, this equates to patient experience, which could prove to be a major distinguishing factor between different healthcare providers. Thus, healthcare providers must start thinking about providing personalised care to their patients.
- **Engage consumers through digital channels:** More consumers are now making their decisions without help from third parties. Hence, the benefits they get from subscribing to one healthcare provider over others must be clearly communicated. Hospitals should think about creating patient portals and mobile apps so that their

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What Will Consumeristic Healthcare Look Like?

With telehealth and self-monitoring being popularised among more and more people, consumeristic healthcare post-COVID-19 is going to be influenced heavily by digital technology. It is going to involve the use of machine-learning algorithms and AI to predict prognoses, smartly distribute work to doctors and nurses and manage patient intake virtually.

Virtual consultations by doctors and clinicians are going to add to the patient experience immensely. It certainly addresses one of the major issues that patients find in their healthcare experience: lack of sufficient interaction with their primary healthcare providers. Digital modes of healthcare dissemination also allow for continuous contact with the patients through simple text messages or video clips – communication mediums that do not necessitate direct interaction but can still improve the patient experience.

How to Avail the Benefits of Consumerism

As consumerism takes its roots in healthcare, a more symbiotic consumer-provider relationship is on its way in Europe and around the world. Consumerism in healthcare

services become more accessible to patients. Moreover, hospitals and other providers need to innovate their services and outreach based on consumer feedback.

• **Act on increasing price sensitivity:** Pricing is yet another aspect that healthcare providers should reform. Adjusting service prices according to consumer preferences and suggesting alternative cost-effective medicine prescriptions will help foster consumer loyalty and increase patient satisfaction.

• **Leverage partnerships within healthcare ecosystems:** European hospitals should also be prepared for some fundamental changes in their decision-making infrastructure, such as an increase in public-private partnerships (PPPs). Since the expectations of patients from both public and private healthcare providers are the same, PPPs can provide a more consolidated approach to respond to increasing consumerism in the sector.

• **Redesign of marketing channels, strategies, topics and brand positioning:** In addition to providing advanced solutions, services and innovation, the value proposition should be adapted to consumers rather than patients. Preventive medicine gravitates around very different topics

than sick care-oriented medicine. New channels such as social media and digital tools will play a significant role that healthcare providers would need to adapt to. Understanding the needs of consumers that are not necessarily having a health problem will be the pivotal point to build this new 360° marketing and consumer engagement strategies. The new scenario will include providing the solutions that consumers demand in the channels where they are having conversations with brands from other industries (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) and communicating on topics of health-related with brand engagement and lifestyle rather than traditional sick care.

Patients would need to embrace a paradigm shift as well to benefit from this trend. This would include:

- **Willingness to share data:** Patients must be more willing to share their medical data for the benefit of research. The availability of more data can help alter digital healthcare to better suit patient needs and expectations. Feedback is similarly very important so that future services can be better. The main drivers to encourage consumers to share data will be the trust that healthcare brands can create by using tailored marketing actions and also providing immediate value to the consumers in return for data sharing.

- **Embrace “lifestyle medicine”:** Consumerism is an opportunity for patients to get actively involved in their own care. As noted by [Bertalan Meskó](#), “Lifestyle medicine emphasises nutrition, exercise, sleep restoration, stress release, avoidance of toxic substances, mental health and social connectedness as tools to better

health based on scientific evidence. Patients are actively involved in their care. Medication (if needed) and behaviour changes are combined”. Digital tools and wearables play an important role in enabling monitoring and diagnosis in this approach.

Overcoming the Challenges of Consumerism Creating an All-Inclusive Approach

A major point of contention in the ‘patient’ vs ‘consumer’ debate is whether all strata of the society are, in fact, ready to be consumers. Those facing financial challenges may be discouraged from availing adequate and good-quality healthcare facilities if the industry becomes entirely consumeristic. Similarly, the older population may not be up to date with the latest technologies. This is an important challenge given that this segment of the population provides a significantly large number of consumers.

The COVID-19 crisis is helping healthcare overcome the challenges mentioned above. This is evident from the feedback shared by doctors based on their experiences during the pandemic. Some of the more recent debates and discussions in the area suggest that even those who are limited by financial resources or knowledge of digital technology can avail new-age healthcare during and after the COVID-19 crisis. What this requires is the proper dissemination of information about how to use digital healthcare resources. Hospitals and consumers must work together to know how best to customise digital technology to different groups of people so they are all able to access healthcare. ■

REFERENCES

For full references, please email edito@healthmanagement.org or visit <https://ii.hm/15j6>