



The Role of IT in Improving Health Care 6 Goals Shaping Priorities for the Future

The health care industry has always generated enormous amounts of information. With an eye toward the future, the medical community has begun applying the insights gained from that data to strategies for prevention, early intervention, better patient care and more accurate predictions of outcomes.



1. Factor in Social Determinants

One of the emerging ideas reshaping attitudes toward patient care lies in the ability to factor in social determinants. External factors like where patients live, what they do for work and lifestyle choices play a role in their health, yet have rarely been considered by the health community until now.

By incorporating social determinants into patient evaluations, health care providers can get a much broader picture of the individual, allowing them to go beyond the diagnosis of a condition.

Better integration between clinical data and socioeconomic data will prompt health practitioners to ask better questions—not just what, but why, and what else don't we know—and derive new insights.

Consider the obstetrician who realizes she's suddenly seeing an unusually large number of miscarriages among her patients. Data can be used to determine commonalities between external factors that may be contributing to the higher-than-normal miscarriage rates.

With insights deducted from data, health care providers can be proactive in improving patient care and make predicting health outcomes more reliable. They'll be better able to identify people at risk, pinpoint and take measures to prevent problems, and better plan for the future.



2. Consider Long-Term Benefits Over ROI

When considering an investment in information technology, the discussion usually centers around ROI. The questions management wants answered are: How soon will we derive the benefits? When will we achieve payback? And does the investment make financial sense?

When evaluating information technology as it relates to health care, prioritizing purely based on ROI misses the point. The most important criteria should be improving patient experiences and clinical outcomes. The question that must be answered is: What's best for patients?

With the ongoing shift from fee-for-service to fee-for-value payment models, health care providers can't focus only on immediate benefits. To provide real value, their investments in information technology must help them to anticipate and prevent future problems. The technology must lead to improvements in the long-term quality, safety and efficiency of care.



3. Increase Cyber Security

The privacy rules put in place by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) raised awareness about protecting personal health information but compliance doesn't necessarily translate into security. The threats of cyber attack in health care continue to grow daily.

In addition to protecting against the theft of sensitive data, the health care industry must also defend against cyber threats to medical equipment and critical infrastructure. The opportunity for attacks extends beyond record keeping to many diagnostic and treatment tools.

One of the biggest potential dangers is "medjacking," the hijacking of medical devices. Imagine the potentially devastating consequences of someone with malicious intent hacking into the security systems that control pacemakers and insulin pumps.

Another concern is the manipulation of medical equipment. A hacked monitor, for example, could provide altered or falsified critical data, or be disabled altogether. These are actions that can have serious, possibly even fatal, consequences.

From medical data tracking to bedside life support systems, technology innovations have revolutionized healthcare delivery. However, at the same time, the latest apps, mobile operating systems, and medical devices create many privacy and security challenges.

While health care providers like hospitals typically have systems in place to protect against hacking, cyber threats are continually growing and changing. Staying on top of them is essential. Technology has greatly improved health care, but the health care community must be ever-vigilant in ensuring its benefits are delivered safely.



4. Use Technology to Boost Patient Engagement

The link between patient involvement and clinical outcomes is unmistakable. The evidence is clear: when patients take an active, ongoing role in managing their health, the results are better than those achieved with episodic medical care alone. But getting patients to voluntarily make changes in how they live is no easy feat.

Encouraging patient involvement begins with a shift in attitude by health care providers. No longer can they focus solely on treating the sick. Their new emphasis must be on promoting health through lifestyle, preventive care and early intervention.

Patient engagement can be fostered in many ways. Consider these examples:

- **Community Outreach**—Health care providers should reach out to patients on an ongoing basis, not just when the patient is ill. They must interact with patients earlier and in non-traditional settings by getting out into the communities where people live and work.
- **Personal Health Data**—New strategies are needed to incorporate patient-generated health data into care. Technology like wearable trackers and smartphone apps can help open dialogues about personal well-being and encourage compliance with healthy lifestyle regimens.
- **Social Media**—Online communities offer an opportunity to deliver clear, useful health care information directly to targeted audiences.
- **Patient Portals**—Appointment booking is not enough. Health care providers should use portals to connect personally with patients, provide education on health-related issues and encourage behaviors that result in the highest quality of life.

Education and communication are of key importance. Methods like the ones mentioned above, can stimulate two-way communication between health care providers and patients and ultimately create a higher level of patient involvement.



5. Optimize EHRs to Improve Clinical Outcomes

For many years health care organizations have worked to implement technologies such as EHRs. Certainly EHRs provide many advantages over paper records. When health care providers have access to comprehensive and accurate information, patients receive better medical care. And the increased efficiency and productivity are valuable gains, but they're not enough.

The data in EHRs must be augmented with a clinical decision support (CDS) system to assist providers in making patient care decisions. A CDS system can offer evidence-based clinical guidelines for diagnosis and protocols for treatment. It can provide information about drugs, cross-reference patient allergies to medications and generate alerts for potential issues like drug interactions.

The goal with EHRs was never to simply eliminate paper medical records. The larger objective lies in using those EHRs to improve clinical and financial outcomes and provide safer, better and more efficient care.



6. Work Together to Explore New Technologies

The advances being made in health care are occurring daily. To accelerate that progress, industry leaders must foster an organizational culture open to adopting innovative technologies. They must create collaboration labs and diverse consortiums of education in which they share information and consider new technologies, even if the application of those technologies isn't immediately evident.

Health care providers must also look at solutions previously ignored. Might they contain untapped opportunities to improve community health? What new information can be gleaned from existing data?

Health care has undergone significant change in recent years but the value of IT and its impact on treating patients have yet to be fully realized. Innovation doesn't happen in a bubble. By working together, the medical community can reap the rewards of innovation and be able to offer their patients the best and most cost-effective care.

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