BLOG

Three roles technology can play in your health equity strategy

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Health equity can no longer be a check-the-box initiative. For many health care organizations, their health equity strategies are essential to delivering high-quality care to the communities they serve. However, without digital technology, it's hard to scale this work with finite financial resources and workforce constraints.

Digital solutions are increasingly filling this gap and enabling organizations to address disparities in care and care outcomes. Here are three ways technology can advance your health equity strategy from outreach to outcomes.

Technology for good: Three ways digital health can support health equity

01 Proactively capture data to understand who you are serving (or missing)

Technology has the power to help identify and address disparities in health outcomes—but that relies on having complete and accurate data on the patients and communities served.

Often, organizations focus on data collection during the patient visit in order to subsequently tailor care delivery—missing an opportunity to leverage technology further upstream to proactively identify community and patient needs. The latter is a non-negotiable step to ensure that care solutions are in direct response to what data shows and not based on assumptions about what we think patients need.

"If we can have more accuracy instead of general information, patients can be directed to more appropriate levels of care," says Dr. Huiling Zhang, MD, MPH, MBA, Head of Medical Office, Connected Care at Philips.

Traditionally, organizations have adopted "hotspotting" to identify hospital superutilizers and proactively tailor care and social support. Others have leveraged "geotargeting" to pinpoint geographic areas of greatest need to focus patient outreach.

While these methods help to uncover high-need patients and communities, organizations are increasingly looking for more proactive solutions. Artificial intelligence (AI) can support this effort especially when trying to provide more targeted, personalized care solutions.

For example, Dr. Zhang described the practice of clinical surveillance to identify patients who might need more attention. To do this, organizations use large scale data sets combined with the right AI algorithms to stratify patients based on their risk of deterioration. By doing this, organizations ensure that high-need patients don't fly under the radar.

AI is not only helpful in identifying who needs care but what kind of care. For example, "with more accurate data and measurement combined with AI we can look at a population that, for instance, is more prone to diabetes and we can better direct appropriate types of care," says Dr. Zhang.

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>
> Dr. Huiling Zhang, MD, MPH, MBA

Added benefit:
These methods help with resource allocation and ensure organizations judiciously invest in the right types of services that not only best meet patients' needs but that are focused on the patients who need it the most.

02 Embed digital tools in clinician workflows to guide holistic patient support

Data collection can and should go beyond clinical factors. Today, organizations would be remiss not to collect social determinants of health data to improve clinical care and address the root causes of disparate health outcomes.

"Social determinants of health need to be part of the patient risk adjustment to improve the accuracy of AI predictions, especially for those with limited access to regular care," says Dr Zhang. But data collection is not enough if it's not integrated within the technology platforms that guide the patient and provider journey.

Organizations are increasingly investing in or partnering with technology solutions that not only help to collect data on patients' social needs, but also guide referrals to social care support and provide clinicians with a holistic picture of their patients' clinical and non-clinical needs.

"Care is a continuum, from the hospital all the way to the home. It's not just about virtual care or remote patient monitoring. It's also about connecting patients in need to the right care providers and community resources," says Dr. Zhang.

By embedding these solutions into existing workflows and interoperable systems, organizations can ensure coordination across social services, providers, and payers—improving patient navigation for those who need it the most.

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Added benefit:
This change management technique empowers physicians, who often feel ill-equipped to address patients' non-clinical needs such as financial assistance or housing insecurity. "The connection to a health care provider who can confidently act on the information being collected is as important as the technology itself," says Dr. Zhang.

03 Deploy digital technology to increase access and reduce time to treatment

We have seen a proliferation of technologies that fundamentally alter access to care, the most common being telehealth. While virtual visits address the time and transportation costs facing many patients, it's only the first step. To deliver timely treatment, we need a virtual ecosystem that follows the patient across their care journey.

For example, provider-to-provider specialty consults enable a patient's primary care provider to connect with specialists virtually and provide an immediate diagnosis and treatment plan, rather than a referral that might delay care. Similarly, asynchronous care connects patients and providers between visits, allowing patients to address concerns now instead of at the next available appointment.

One example of asynchronous care, according to Dr. Zhang, is a remote monitoring patch that transmits data to a nurse, physician, or care coordinator with the patient's risk level and elevates the need for any necessary intervention. "This type of care is particularly important for underserved communities, as they often lack transportation options to access care onsite," says Dr. Zhang.

Added benefit:
Both virtual care and patient navigation tools go beyond meeting the consumerism demand for delivering care how and when patients want it. These solutions increasingly are critical to delivering on and exceeding quality of care metrics and ratings.

While technological advances offer the opportunity to improve health equity, its success hinges on thoughtful and purposeful design. "Only by understanding the full range of our users' capabilities and limitations (physical, cognitive, social) can we begin to reduce the number of mismatches between them and their interactions with the world," says Dr. Jon Mason, Senior Usability Designer at Philips.

To achieve a user-friendly, intuitive technology that induces less errors or biases, simply investing in technology is not enough. Due diligence is required.

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