HOSPITALS

BY JOSEPH PEPE, MD

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We can do nearly everything in the palm of our hand today, from grocery shopping to running our home appliances. The effect of on-demand, hand-held technology on the healthcare industry is nothing short of transformative. As we look to the next decade, information and technology will change both the patient experience and the approach healthcare organizations take to doing business.

Consumer-focused healthcare technologies, like wearable devices and health tracking apps, are putting patients in control their own health awareness and individualized health care. By tracking steps and meals, one can begin to build their own personal data set that helps their providers understand their unique risk factors and make customized lifestyle recommendations. But let's take the power of the Apple watch (or smart phone or other connected device) a few steps further. We've already seen stories of people being saved by their heart-monitoring watch picking up on imminent cardiac arrest. Today at CMC, we are able to implant a device to remotely monitor their heart failure symptoms and proactively adjust medications, avoiding hospitalization. As we look to the future, more and more of these connected solutions will help patients manage chronic disease and maintain healthier lifestyles.

Connectivity also means more health care can be delivered outside of traditional healthcare settings. This becomes incredibly important for vulnerable populations and remote areas where specialists are few and far between. Virtual visits and telehealth mean on-demand care with a doctor or advanced practice provider is only a few clicks away. Not only does this have the potential to create unlimited access for patients, it also can help ease the pressure on healthcare workforce development. Providers can be anywhere so long as a patient has a secure internet connection.

Transforming health care in this way requires a new approach and new partnerships. In addition to regulatory and payment pressures, the need to invest in technologies, share data, and change workflows requires a new degree of collaboration. We see this in New Hampshire with many of the state's healthcare organizations entering new collaborative arrangements. But there are new, unconventional players, too. Tech giants like Google, Amazon and Microsoft, retail chains like Walmart and Walgreens, and even Uber are becoming or working with healthcare companies. The traditional brick and mortar healthcare organization can learn a lot from these companies about giving the patient-consumer the product and service they want, where and when they want it.

None of this, however, means the actual brick and mortar is going away. Quite the contrary. With advanced technologies and new partnerships comes somewhat of a hospital building boom in New Hampshire and elsewhere. Our aging population has more complex conditions requiring more advanced care. Technology is great at keeping patients out of the hospital until they're more acutely ill. By the time an 80 year old with heart failure needs hospital care, it's pretty serious. Hospitals are expanding to care for this population, and the boomers right behind them, with advanced procedure rooms and single-patient recovery rooms. But healthcare organizations are also building outside the hospital, with specialty practices and ambulatory surgical centers giving patients more convenient, less costly access to advanced care and procedures. In some areas of the country, entrepreneurial organizations are even building medical malls. These holistic centers of health and wellness allow people to get an MRI, fill a prescription, and have a massage all in one place.

Technology, new players, and changing consumer expectations are all disrupting health care as we've long-known it—and that's a good thing for providers and, most of all, patients.

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