

Technology and Healthcare: Breaking Down Doctor-Patient Barriers – Guest Post by Howard J. Luks, MD

Mary Pat's Note: I want to share these thoughts about technology and the doctor-patient relationship from Dr. Howard Luks. Dr. Luks is a member of the Mayo Clinic Center for Social Media, a fantastic follow on twitter, and originally posted these on his site, which is a recommended read for anyone interested in healthcare.



Technology conjures images of steel and gadgets. Parts and pieces. Bells and whistles. It's sophisticated. Intriguing. High tech. But it's well... cold and impersonal. Or is it? Many of us have witnessed firsthand the things that distance patients from doctors. Status. Knowledge. Jargon. Peculiar equipment. Rushed visits. Should we add technology to the mix?

A few short years ago, some health experts refuted efforts designed to progress the use of technology in healthcare. They insisted that technology would distance patients from doctors, who would increase their focus on "dissecting" and "diseases" rather than "emotional connection" and the well-being of their patients. Yet, recent reports have focused on the converse: how technology is bridging the doctor-patient gap, rather than widening it.

Convenience

The most obvious benefit to using technology in healthcare is convenience. With progressive electronic medical records, physicians, referral sources and diagnosticians can share data with ease and speed, thus enhancing and expediting patient care. Patients can also view their own test results, refill prescriptions and send and receive messages from key healthcare professionals, in as close to real time as possible. In today's high-speed living, this benefit remains apparent and immeasurable.

Transparency

Google makes finding answers to almost anything possible. While doing solo searches may not glean the most accurate or comprehensive information, most people can grasp the basics when they dedicate time and energy to learning about a condition or a treatment.

Technology also assists patients to research doctors, practices, hospitals and centers in order to determine a good fit. Although not always reliable sources of information for upstanding physicians (there will always be a customer who is dissatisfied and who will be more likely to write negative online reviews), reviews of truly unethical practices will clearly stand out. With such visibility, patients can make informed decisions about their care. Of course, this can backfire. Perpetual "doctor shopping" can become a deterrent to good health. A 2010 study noted that patients who had a consistent relationship with a single physician experienced both better health and better satisfaction with their care than those who didn't. And a recent Consumer Reports survey stated that 76 percent of primary-care physicians surveyed said that establishing a long-term relationship with a doctor is the most important factor for patients to receive better medical care. Yet, online quality searches offer a good

starting point for patients.

With technology, the trend has been to become your own advocate, and patients have grown an interest in understanding their health. With advanced technology, patients themselves can experience their conditions firsthand. This often enhances buy-in and follow-through on physician recommendations. In one study, cardiac patients who had the opportunity to see their heart scans were more likely to follow recommendations to reduce their risk, such as losing weight.

The Changing Role of Physician

The advent of technology in healthcare in recent years has extended beyond the one-way measures designed for patient and professional convenience, like electronic charting, e-scripts and looking up test results. Now, patients, themselves, can do their research online, unearth information from consumer-driven TV marketing, and use apps designed to track, treat and prevent ill health. This has shifted the physician role to one of interpreter, advisor and coach. Dr. Robert Rowley, a family practice physician in Hayward recently wrote, "Patients, when they come to the doctor seeking health care, aren't necessarily looking for 'raw data' – they have already looked it up online. Instead, they are looking for meaning." This role shift severs the patriarchal, hierarchical, authoritative relationship that physicians have traditionally had (or were perceived to have had) with their patients. And that's a good thing. While doctors will retain the utmost expert medical understanding due to their training and extensive experience, with a more collaborative approach comes the patient's vested interest in their well-being. This can only serve to improve the health of many.

Personalized Care

When all is said and done, what really matters to any human—physician, patient or otherwise—is that they mean something, and that they are treated with respect and dignity. Treating people like objects in any relationship—employer/employee, husband/wife, or patient/doctor—never works. We get ourselves into trouble any time we view people as objects, as means to an end—patient appointments as a means to pay overhead; a sensitive prognosis discussion or phone call as a deterrent to catching up and leaving on time. Yes, we need limits. But not cold and harsh ones. Technology, especially social media and videography, within the confines of ethics, has broken down barriers to allow doctors to see patients as people (and vice versa, to a limited degree) and to celebrate them as such. It's hard to ignore or forget a post about a new baby, a move, or a family death. While the realities of running an efficient practice can't be ignored, people certainly can't.

Technology, it seems, is a winner. It's here to stay. After all, people across the world connect with Google and Skype, navigation bars and Tweeting. Let's use it to our patients' advantage, in "service of humanity... with conscience and dignity."

Howard Luks, MD (@hjluks), recognized by US News and World Report as one of America's Top Sports Medicine Surgeons, is an Orthopedic Surgeon who practices in both Westchester and Dutchess Counties in New York. As an early adopter of Twitter, Howard Luks MD also runs a blog, a Facebook Page, a YouTube channel and a personal site to educate, interact and engage his patients. Thanks to his social capital and proven ability to reach a global healthcare audience, Howard Luks MD serves as a Strategic Advisor to many mobile health care start-ups and Venture Capital firms with strong health care related portfolio companies. With improved visibility and

online credibility, Dr. Luks is actively utilized to engage his colleagues to join him in participating in the Health 2.0 movement, content creation, outbound marketing strategies and strategic content management.



Dr. Luks (pronounced "Lucks") says "my presence online is to support the spread of meaningful, trustworthy, evidence based (when available), actionable information and guidance to patients and consumers from around the world. I feel that physicians have a moral obligation to fill Google's servers with quality content to drown out the commercialized nonsense that exists online today."