

Learn This: Physicians, Smartphones and mHealth

For the organized and busy professional on the go, the smartphone has quickly become a necessity on par with a person's house keys, wallet, or purse. The past five years have vaulted the smartphone from status symbol to must-have business tool by bringing data and communication capabilities from your office to the palm of your hand. With decision making and communication tools always at the ready, you can be productive from anywhere you are, and you are freed up to bring information to clients, meetings, and conferences without the hindrance of a laptop.

Physicians, practitioners and forward thinking healthcare organizations are leading the charge to embrace mobile health, often called **mHealth**, or the practice of patient care supported by mobile devices. A survey conducted at the physician online and mobile community **QuantiaMD** in May of 2011 found 83% of physicians reported using at least one mobile device and 25% used both a phone and a tablet. Of the 17% surveyed who did not use a mobile device, 44% planned on purchasing a mobile device sometime in 2011. Physicians surveyed reported their top uses for mobile devices as :

- looking up drug treatments and reference material (69%)
- learning about new treatments & clinical research (42%)
- helping me choose treatment paths for patients (40%)
- helping me diagnose patients (39%)
- helping me educate patients (27%)
- making decisions about ordering labs or imaging tests (26%), and
- accessing patient information and records (20%)

Why is mHealth such a big deal?

The reason the healthcare industry is moving so quickly to adopt **mHealth** practices: changing legislative, demographic and financial conditions are forcing providers and care organizations to seek efficiencies and cost-savings from technology. Many physicians purchased their mobile device not imagining it as a clinical tool, only to discover possible uses in patient care after adoption. Moreover, since mobile devices are built on platforms that allow for the development and distribution of healthcare-specific applications (apps) that support clinical practice, software companies are able to quickly respond to physician demand for new and better solutions.

Applications can vary widely in quality, application, and cost, but are generally easy to acquire, test and adopt. Reference works like Daviss Drug Guide (**iOS / Android**), Tabers Medical Dictionary (**iOS / Android**) and Netters Atlas of Human Anatomy (**iOS / Android**) are available in searchable, easy-to-use digital versions. Tablets, with larger, shareable screens provide even better opportunities in patient education and imaging diagnostics – without having to drag (or roll) a laptop into a care setting, and without the barrier of a screen that separates provider and patient.

mHealth and EHRs

Even bigger opportunities are possible when mobile devices are tied into Electronic Health Records (EHRs) to give providers access to their patients history at a glance. With the HITECH provisions of the ARRA or Stimulus Act, healthcare organizations have incentives to adopt EHRs that fulfill meaningful use requirements in the next five years. While current adoption of EHR technology is only at around 20 to 25%, healthcare analysts David C. Kibbe, MD, MBA and Brian Klepper, PHD writing for **Kaiser Health News** predict that 2011

and possibly 2012 will find providers cleaning house to prepare for EHR adoption or upgrade, while some organizations will stay on the sidelines to avoid high switching costs from legacy electronic and paper systems .

The potential for care is enormous however, as mobile access to patient data in a secure setting would mean dramatic efficiencies for providers who normally have to rely on either a stationary computer or a retrieved paper record. Mobile patient data would also allow for easier compliance with hospital treatment protocols via alerts, and for consultation amongst physicians outside of their immediate location, as well as ePrescribing to cut down on time, resources, and fraud. Concerns about security, liability and reimbursement are still important issues for vendors, providers and patients but the demand for a more flexible and efficient healthcare system is driving software companies to offer more powerful and interoperable products that meet these issues head on.

Providers arent alone in pushing **mHealth** forward. Today's patient wants to be more informed about their care and the options they are presented with medically and financially. The same streamlined access to information that is winning over large numbers of caregivers is empowering patients to make healthier choices in their lifestyles, and a better decisions navigating the healthcare system. According to the **Pew Internet and American Life Project**, nearly three quarters of American users (or roughly 59% of the entire US population) have used the Internet to research health information .

As both patients and providers become more accustomed to having their health decisions supported by mobile data, secure sharing of clinical, audio, and video data between patients and their caregivers will empower the healthcare system to tackle more of its challenges with technology.

For Physicians: Starting with mHealth

If you don't have a smartphone, check out this **article** for recommendations. The same article includes advice on free and paid apps that any smartphone user will find helpful.

For medical-specific apps, start with the Big Boys:

- **Medscape (iOS / Android)** is a product of WebMD, and features full, free access to drug, diseases, protocol, CME and hospital directory information.
- **Epocrates (iOS / Android)** is a free drug reference app that also has a premium subscription feature for more in-depth info, as well as paid versions of the app for specialties and comprehensive drug interactions.
- **UpToDate (iOS, unreleased)** is a web-based service for physician reference and evidence based treatment options as well as CME for clinicians that is planning on releasing an iPhone app sometime this month. Check out **their site** to stay tuned for the apps release.

The ability to download apps (the Market for **Android devices** or App Store for **iPhone** and **iPad**) is built right into the device so users can quickly search for and install software without touching a desktop or laptop. These apps are a great way to get started using your device for **mHealth** applications, and both can be on your device within minutes of finishing this article.