What's next

Healthcare

Trends to Watch in 2021: Telehealth, Consumerization and AI-powered clinical decision support

The digital transformation of healthcare that accelerated in 2020 will continue to expand in 2021. There will be an emphasis on telehealth for broader access to care, deployment of AI-powered solutions that prioritize patient and provider experiences, and stronger systems integration for improved information flows between stakeholders to improve care and financial outcomes.

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The extraordinary demands of a global health crisis in 2020 dramatically accelerated the digital transformation of clinician workflows, patient care, and healthcare delivery. As we hopefully emerge from the pandemic in 2021, the challenges will continue to be reducing physician burnout, more fully opening healthcare's digital front door, and strengthening financial resilience. In addition, the lessons learned in 2020 will sharpen the focus on three key trends that will expand the scope and scale of transformation and play significant roles in healthcare delivery for years to come.

1) Broader and deeper support for telehealth services

While telehealth skyrocketed in response to the realities of COVID-19, we will continue to see utilization expand because it enables increased and more flexible access to healthcare services. As we build on the acceptance of telehealth among patients, providers, health systems, and payers in 2020, there will be a stronger focus on the digital patient experience and provider satisfaction.

For example, what does a virtual waiting room look like, how do patients interact with nurses and share their medical history, and how will physicians get seamless access to patient records, take clinical notes, and interact with remote patients? Effectively addressing those questions will require deeper system integrations and information-sharing across healthcare provider and payer networks to drive better patient and clinician experiences.

2) The consumerization of healthcare will dramatically grow in scale and scope with multiple downstream effects

Health systems will need to clearly define and communicate their distinctive competitive "brand" of healthcare services in an increasingly consumer-focused market. That especially means owning – vs. outsourcing – the digital front doors that differentiate their services and ensure that their patients have positive experiences in every in-person or virtual encounter. The patient experience will encompass communications with care teams, scheduling appointments, obtaining needed tests and medications, and other areas, including health system outreach to at-risk and other specific patient populations.

Health systems will also focus on developing patient-facing AI tools such as chatbots and virtual assistants that provide easy access to the healthcare information patients need, when they need it. These solutions also can go a long way toward increasing patient engagement, especially for regular preventative care and needed follow-up to ensure that "no one falls through the gaps." That involves educating patients about specific healthcare issues as we've seen with COVID-19 and enabling effective sharing of medical information across providers in different care settings no matter the nature of a patient's concern; after all, no one wants to be

a medical mystery.

Health systems will prioritize two factors when deploying patient-facing digital solutions. The first is selecting solutions that best meet their patient population's needs and measurably improve access and engagement without introducing unintended barriers. That certainly includes usability but also recognizes the realities of healthcare and economic disparities. Some patients, especially those at the highest risk, may not have reliable or affordable access to a computer, smartphone, or internet connection. The second factor is the growing consumer concern for data privacy and security. Health systems will need to establish and communicate easily understood policies and procedures to protect patient data and secure online access. That necessarily includes the use of voice biometrics and other sophisticated ways of identifying and authenticating patients.

From a healthcare administrative standpoint, financial resiliency will be a priority, with a continued focus on revenue recovery and appropriate reimbursements. That will require greater integration between clinical and administrative systems to improve information exchange between stakeholders, including providers, hospitals, and payers.

3) Increased availability of and demand for AI-driven clinical decision support solutions

The urgent need for information to drive diagnosis, treatment, and other clinical protocols related to COVID-19 resulted in unprecedented global sharing of medical knowledge. We can expect that trend to broaden across clinical areas to capture the benefits of improved access to clinical intelligence. IT vendors will expand the availability of AI-powered analytics tools that make it possible to tap the potential clinical and research value of vast volumes of healthcare data generated daily. We also will see increased adoption of solutions that deliver workflow-integrated, real-time AI for clinical decision support at the point of care. This will be a significant element in providing better care and financial outcomes, improving patient and clinician satisfaction, and reducing physician burnout from administrative workloads.

Uniting all three of these trends is a reinvigorated dedication to digital healthcare innovation. As we can see in the organization charts of healthcare systems and the investments that healthcare executives are making, innovation is much more than a buzzword – it's the new way of operating to achieve the transformative improvements the industry both needs and wants.

Patients Front and Center is a blog series by Diana Nole, Executive Vice President &

General Manager of Nuance s Healthcare division. Today, patients are the most underutilized resource in healthcare, and they want to be fully engaged in their health and care. Patients want more time, more empathy, more context, and more personalized care. When we apply AI and technology to reduce clinicians administrative tasks, doctors and nurses can give more to their patients   keeping the patient front and center   to improve experiences, outcomes, and lives.

Tags: AI, digital transformation, health IT, healthcare, healthcare IT

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About Diana Nole

Diana joined Nuance in June 2020 as the executive vice president and general manager of Nuance's Healthcare division, which is focused on improving the overall physician-patient experience through cutting-edge AI technology applications. She is responsible for all business operations, growth and innovation strategy, product development, and partner and customer relationships. Over the course of her career, Diana has held numerous executive and leadership roles, serving as the CEO of Wolter Kluwers' Healthcare division, president of Carestream's Digital Medical Solutions business, and vice president of strategy, product management, and marketing for Eastman Kodak's Healthcare Information Technology Solutions business. Diana has dual degrees in Computer Science and Math from the State University of New York at Potsdam and earned her MBA from the University of Rochester's Simon School.

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