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Startups Leveraging Technology to Revolutionize Health Care

By Sarah DeLucia | 11.1.13

Many ills are associated with health care in America today: It's inefficient, too costly and the quality of care is inconsistent across institutions. But that's changing, in part because of innovative, new startup platforms that improve health outcomes, drive down costs and increase patient satisfaction.

Representatives from some of these developing platforms discussed their ideas at Tuesday's health care roundtable, part of the kickoff events for 1776's Challenge Cup, a global competition to identify and reward the most-promising startups taking on the world's greatest challenges. At the roundtable, four of the D.C. health care startup competitors spoke with Dr. Brian Jacobs, chief medical information officer at [Children's National Medical Center](http://www.childrensnational.org) (<http://www.childrensnational.org>), and 1776 Cofounder Evan Burfield to discuss their ventures and how they address the challenges and opportunities within the industry.

In many cases, vital improvements to the nation's health care system require increased access to information. And while clinical information is overly available, not all of it is easily accessible. This can make it harder for physicians to diagnose problems and for patients or caregivers to understand what they should do to prevent new health problems from occurring or to resolve issues once patients have left the hospital.

For instance, as the volume of information about health problems and their possible treatments continues to grow—there are over 23 million citations in PubMed, a medical database—it becomes increasingly difficult to synthesize this information quickly to make fast, and appropriate, treatment decisions.

For this, “you need an algorithm,” Jacobs said.

Dorsata Inc. (<http://www.dorsata.com>) is in the market to provide just that. Cofounder David Fairbrothers explained that Dorsata enables health care institutions to establish best-practice protocols for patient diagnosis and care. The algorithms used could help reduce the number of tests carried out on patients, saving on costs and improving health outcomes.

Moving away from a volume-based system to one based on value is the direction the industry is progressively headed, even at the regulatory level. This year, an initiative (<http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2011pres/04/20110429a.html>) made possible by the Affordable Care Act began rewarding hospitals for the quality of care given to Medicare patients, not the number of procedures ordered.

In the long-established, volume-based care system, health care providers are paid for the treatments they give and procedures they perform. Unfortunately, this framework has increased health care costs as doctors often order more tests and perform more operations than are necessary. By contrast, a value-based system prizes moderation; payment is instead contingent upon meeting pre-determined performance standards.

But getting to a wholly value-based system that works will take innovation. No matter how great a technology may be, the key to its success is whether or not it’s actually used.

Jacobs estimates that out of the total U.S. population, only about 15 percent are actively engaged in their health. He said one key question in delivering better health care is answering the following question: “How do we create the right incentives to get [everyone else] to engage?” Similarly, health care providers must have an incentive to use platforms designed for them. What good is a product if nobody uses it?

To Gail Embt, founder of [Kinergy Health \(http://kinergyhealth.com\)](http://kinergyhealth.com), the solution is a platform based on the principles of social media. Kinergy Health is testing what they call Kinergy Navigators—online communities where patients can interact with their physicians, home care aides, family members and others responsible for providing their care.

“What causes me to engage in health?” she asked. “When a crisis, issue or an event crops up, what’s the first thing I need? I have a question, I need an answer. It’s being able to quickly and efficiently connect to somebody that can answer that question.”

But the group agreed that successful technologies must also integrate with users’ lifestyles to ensure people will actually use the new tools. Since an individual’s day-to-day routine might entail watching daytime television, playing video games or sleeping, this creates quite a challenge.

“When you figure that out,” Jacobs said, “you’re going to be successful.”

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