

The advantages of Apps



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The rise of mobile phone and tablet applications, or 'apps', has grown significantly over the last couple of years, and more of us are using these in our daily lives, whether they be for checking traffic updates, catching up with the latest sports news or social media.

I noticed recently that this magazine has started to review healthcare apps for medical professionals. After doing some research, I found that health and well-being applications are estimated to make up around 40% of all new applications being developed. This is a huge market that will get even bigger as the benefits become further apparent and the technology becomes more widespread.

As new apps are developed, patients can also take advantage. The last couple of years has already seen the rise of the so-called 'e-patient' – a patient who has the latest information about their condition and possible treatments after researching on the World Wide Web. These patients are also creating online communities and forums with those who

have the same conditions or illnesses.

The UN recently launched 'm-Health' to use mobile technology such as text messages and apps to help target non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular and chronic respiratory diseases. It is hoped that this initiative will encourage governments worldwide to implement m-Health and prevent and treat NCDs and their common risk factors – unhealthy diet, smoking, lack of exercise and alcohol consumption.

NCDs contribute to an estimated 36 million deaths every year, and the UN hopes that the use of the m-Health technology will help to save lives, reduce illness and disability, and significantly reduce healthcare costs.

In England, patients now have access to a vast range of accredited online health information, including NHS Choices and digital information from specific healthcare charities, to NHS trusts that circulate information via Twitter.

GPs and hospital doctors are being asked by the Department of Health to actively encourage patients to use apps on their smartphones or tablets that can monitor their conditions.

The technology has become so advanced that a colleague of mine is able to use an app which allows him to track his asthma conditions, and I am also aware of

another that allows patients to keep track of their immunisations.

In the north west of England some pregnant women with high blood pressure are being asked to use apps to take their own readings rather than having a home visit from a midwife.

Ministers believe that patients who keep a close eye on their condition are less likely to suddenly deteriorate and need urgent treatment in hospital, therefore avoiding expensive healthcare bills to the taxpayer.

Although the advantages of such technology are obvious, I do believe that there are some groups who this will not benefit, particularly elderly patients who may struggle with the technology. In addition, doctor's surgeries could be inundated with people texting in their readings therefore diverting doctors from seeing sick patients.

While downloading apps and talking about your condition with other sufferers via the internet is helpful, can it really change unhealthy habits or guarantee compliance with medicine?

Doctors need to know who their patient is, what their concerns and expectations are, and what the patient is able to do. Meaningful patient engagement that leads to long-term health behaviour change begins with patient-centered, interpersonal relationships between doctors and their patients. **MEH**

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 180 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes.

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