Digital “Snake Oil” or the Future of Healthcare?

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The CEO of the AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (AMA) jumped into hot water—or maybe a burning cauldron—recently when he slammed a wide range of digital health products as a dystopian pit of “snake oil.”

Speaking at the AMA’s annual meeting, **James Madara**, MD, exhorted doctors to take up, once again, their historic role as guardians of reason over hype. He complained about everything from “ineffective electronic health records to an explosion of direct-to-consumer digital health products to apps of mixed quality,” calling them “digital snake oil of the early 21st century.”

The reaction was swift and predictable.

Bryan Vartabedian, MD, the foremost advocate for physicians engaging in public conversation through social media, flogged **Madara** and the AMA by citing the principle that “institutions will work to preserve the problem to which they are the solution.”

John Halamka, MD, the CIO of BETH ISRAEL DEACONESS MEDICAL CENTER, also rejected **Madara’s** argument, writing that “there is no snake oil. We created the digital foundation that is a prerequisite for the next generation of tools.”

So, here we go again. All of us involved in practicing healthcare, writing about healthcare, or caring about healthcare are doing the two things we do best: ignoring the future and blaming each other for our failures.

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Because, in a way, **Madara** is right. There are way too many apps to make sense of, and many seem to have the sole purpose of enriching a new group of 20-year-old entrepreneurs. On the other hand, as **Vartabadian** intimated, imagining that healthcare will continue to escape the consumer revolution is akin to **BLOCKBUSTER** believing entertainment would always involve people going to a store to pick up and return physical media.

As CEO of an almost-200-year-old institution that has finally decided to stop acting its age, I'm here to say that it's time for all of us to change the game. We need to give up the usual whack-a-mole of favorite targets—the AMA, the government, insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, doctors, hospitals, and non-compliant patients—and stop pointing fingers at one another.

We have to recognize that we all overestimate technology in the short term by getting too excited about the latest app. But in the long run, we equally underestimate the power of technology.

Consumer technology, as **Madara** noted in his talk, has transformed every part of our lives, except our lives as patients. But it will transform the patient experience, too—as soon as provider organizations own it, stop waiting for others to tell us what's cool, and start to view these technologies the same way we'd look at a revolutionary new imaging technique.

Sadly, the **Madara** melee makes it hard to imagine we'll stop playing the blame game anytime soon. By the same token, our patients in their 20s will keep pushing ahead with their mobile, digital-native life-styles, leaving most healthcare institutions looking like the next **BLOCKBUSTER**.

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Do you really believe that in the age of INSTACART, TINDER, AIRBNB, SNAPCHAT, INSTAGRAM, and UBER, younger patients will abandon their mobile devices for the privilege of calling us to schedule an appointment (but only after navigating a labyrinth phone tree menu)? Or that they'll open a piece of snail mail to learn their lab results? Or wait in a waiting room? Or wait two weeks for an appointment on any day other than Saturday or Sunday? Or expect to use vacation time during work hours to have all of their health concerns addressed?

So let's use this as a wake-up call for all of us responsible for caring for a population that will have infinite needs but finite resources. Let's recognize that the debate over the value of virtual health versus traditional health will be laughable five years from now, and start utilizing our collective health-system resources to address the new reality: If you are in the healthcare business, you are now competing in a consumer-dominant world.

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In the early 2000s, it became clear to a few visionary people that computer companies would need to become digital companies. The revolution started with a tiny little thing called an iPod, which could store a few hundred songs. The reaction of some to APPLE's "revolutionary idea" would make the reaction to **Madara's** AMA speech look tame.

But that big idea—that our lives would be more mobile and more digital—took that little iPod and evolved it into an ecosystem of apps.

As physicians and healthcare leaders, let's not underestimate digital health, but let's also refuse to be satisfied with what exists in digital health today. It's far better for our professional societies, health systems, and entrepreneurs to work together to lead a healthy and connected future for physicians and patients.

And if you're still exercised over **Madara's** comments? Chill out and download some **Enya** on your APPLE MUSIC server. ■■■

Snake Oil? An Orthopedic Surgeon Responds

Antonia F. Chen, MD, MBA

Forty years ago, the thought of utilizing electronic medical records in most major hospital systems throughout the country would have sounded as crazy as the Jetsons using a driverless car. As the medical field strives to become more efficient and reduce costs with improved healthcare delivery using digital health products, it is important that we never lose the art of practicing medicine. The future is bright, and examining history gives us a sense of how far the field has come.

My own field of orthopedic surgery has undoubtedly benefited positively as a result of digital enhancements to our medical practice. Gone are the days where patients used to bring in stacks of printed MRIs and CT scans on films that we had to sift through and hold up to a light source for hours at a time. Now, we can pull up patients' previous images and make direct comparisons, side-by-side, to newer images to evaluate treatment effectiveness.

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We also have the benefit of accessing digitally scanned patient charts, facilitating information retrieval, and elucidating information from the past that may help us in the present. Electronic medical records can also prevent mistakes from healthcare providers, as typed electronic orders can save time and take out the variable of notoriously bad handwriting. Additionally, allergies are prominently displayed, and healthcare providers can prevent catastrophic mistakes by not being able to order medications that patients are allergic to. Finally, from a research perspective, maintaining electronic medical records facilitates big data gathering and analysis that can assist us in studying specific patient populations to improve care.

For orthopedic patients, embracing technology has also improved patient care and efficiency. Patients now spend less time on paperwork that can get easily lost, and they can update all their medical records electronically. When patients have questions about their surgery, they can watch videos of their surgical procedure from their surgeon and ask questions. After surgery, my goal as an orthopedic surgeon is to encourage increased mobility. By utilizing video technology, patients are able to engage in physical therapy in their own homes on any day of the week without the necessity of traveling to facilities or having co-pays. Additionally, the use of digital technology has facilitated seeing follow-up surgical patients through telemedicine, or a doctor's appointment using video cameras; this allows me to assess patients, while they save time and money traveling to my office.

This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how digital health products can transform the way that we practice medicine. When the first car was produced and displaced the horse and buggy as the main mode of transportation, there was initially strong resistance. However, no one can imagine going back to the days of horse transportation. The world of medicine is similar—while we may resist the changes that are occurring, it's prudent to study what we believe to be practice-changing innovations that improve patient care. Our role as physicians in the digital health product marketplace is to investigate and subsequently separate the beneficial products from those that do not improve patient outcomes. Our goal is to select the best products based on evidence that benefit our patients. As the Hippocratic Oath states, we must always benefit our patients and not harm them.