Long a headache, health IT shows capacity to empower amid COVID-19

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Health care technology has long been a source of frustration for patients and physicians. But the COVID-19 pandemic has, in some ways, turned things around and shown the power that health IT has to deliver on its promise and improve care.

An episode in the AMA’s “Making the Rounds” podcast provides insights into this transformation. It summarizes how health IT is powering medical research and empowering patients to take charge of their health and their health care decisions.

“Making the Rounds” features advice, interviews and discussions on the most important topics affecting the lives and careers of pre-med students, medical students and residents.

Learn more about how this podcast series probes medical students’ questions on health IT.
The wait is over—for some things

“COVID has also shown us some really important lessons in terms of the conduct of research,” said Ann Marie Navar, MD, PhD, associate professor in the Departments of Internal Medicine and Population and Data Sciences and at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, in Dallas.

“We've never seen clinical trials being conducted so rapidly and so efficiently,” she said. “And we also see the value in real-world data, like EHR data, to drive research. That's leading to more and more investment to try to increase the utility of these types of data sources—not just for observational research, but to actually power pragmatic clinical trials, vaccine studies and the like.”

But the pandemic has also changed how patients and physicians interact. Telemedicine has gone from a niche experience to one that almost every patient and every physician is familiar with.

“There’s a lot to be said for the value of an interpersonal visit, but it's also inconvenient,” said Dr. Navar, a cardiologist, noting that she helped develop a program with the Texas Heart Institute called Doctors with Heart, which uses a telemedicine-based platform to connect volunteer cardiologists with patients at federally qualified health centers and clinics that treat uninsured and underinsured patients.

“Some of my patients have to drive long distances to get to my clinic, and being able to offer the ability to consult via telemedicine is a nice way to help increase access to care,” she said on the podcast, recorded in conversation with Matthew Swanson, chair of the AMA Medical Student Section Committee on Health IT, and a medical student at the Frank H. Netter MD School of Medicine at Quinnipiac University in North Haven, Connecticut.

Find out why telehealth’s here for good—in practice, and in medical education.
What the future holds

Of course, health IT is constantly evolving. One area of emphasis is better interoperability.

"It's really hard for even medical records to be combined and harmonized across different health systems—it's really a Tower of Babel," Dr. Navar said, noting the need for broader standardization of coding and billing practices. "We all use ICD-10, but we use it differently. Some health systems use problem lists; some just use billing codes."

She also sees a movement to increase patients' ownership of their medical records and their ability to access them across health systems and clinicians.

Dr. Navar anticipates health IT being used to help “drive improvements in clinical practice,” adding that there are gaps in compliance with care guidelines, many of which can be automated through decision-support pathways.

“What I'm excited about,” she noted, are “tools that will help nudge patients so that [they] can come to their doctor and say, ‘Hey, why haven't I had a flu shot yet? Why am I not on a statin? It looks like I'm overdue for my mammogram.’”

Other episodes in the “Making the Rounds” podcast explores health IT topics such as:

- The ethics of algorithmic bias in artificial intelligence.
- EHR quality measurement, quality of care and patient outcomes.
- YouTube’s efforts to tackle health misinformation.
- The growing pains of medicine in a digital age.

Compelling research, discussions, opinions and more—explore these other original podcasts from the AMA for the latest in medicine and patient care.