

How the definitions of digital health differ

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Smartphones today have more than 100 times the computing power of the average satellite, according to NASA. With technology such as this and others moving at the speed of light, it's important for physicians to know how tech will influence delivery of care to patients. Learn the differences between digital health definitions.

"We are seeing a tsunami of demand from consumers who want access to health care services that are affordable," Karen Rheuban, MD, director for the Center for Telehealth at the University of Virginia, told physicians at the AMA State Legislative Strategy Conference earlier this month in New Orleans.

Benefits of telehealth to patients include timely access to locally unavailable services, better management of chronic diseases and reduced burden and cost for care, Dr. Rheuban said. For physicians, telehealth improves access to consultative services and offers more collaborative care delivery models. But the many definitions that fall below digital health can lead to confusion.

Here are the differences in three main areas of digital health:

- **Telehealth** means the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support a broad scope of remote health care services: Long-distance clinical care, patient and professional health-related education, public health and health administration. Technologies can include videoconferencing, the internet, store-and-forward imaging (in which an image is saved, then sent to the other party, rather than live), streaming media and terrestrial or wireless communications, according to the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT.
- **Telemedicine** permits two-way, real-time interactive communication between a patient and physician, according to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. This means both patient and physician must use interactive telecommunications equipment that includes, at a minimum, audio and video equipment.
- **mHealth** means using mobile-based solutions to deliver health services. Examples of mHealth include an app for a smartphone that allows users to assess their risk for

cardiovascular disease and then identifies nearby screening locations to schedule an appointment as well as sensors that can measure blood pressure, pulse, glucose and other physiologic parameters. The AMA is working with industry leaders to ensure mHealth is safe, effective and supports the needs of physicians and patients.

Almost every state is making telemedicine a priority in 2015, with their fundamental focus on enacting legislation that addresses various aspects of telemedicine, from licensing to clinical standards and practice issues to reimbursement. The AMA has model bills for state medical societies interested in introducing telemedicine legislation.

Experts at the State Legislative Strategy Conference agreed: The developing interest in telemedicine is only going to continue to grow, and physicians need to be at the forefront of determining policy.

“We have to have a cultural shift,” said Robert Jarrin, senior director of government affairs at Qualcomm, Inc., a wireless telecommunications firm. “Not only with the profession, who understand and embrace [telemedicine] when appropriate, but also the business model behind it, a change in business attitudes. Because currently, no matter how wonderful [innovations] are, it’s not easy to integrate technology into our workflows.”

In 2014, physicians in the AMA House of Delegates voted in favor of guiding principles to ensure the appropriate coverage of and payment for telemedicine services. The principles help foster innovation in the use of telemedicine, protect the patient-physician relationship and promote improved care coordination and communication with medical homes. The AMA also is advocating for adoption of these principles with state and federal lawmakers through testimony to congressional committees and other vital activities.

Tell us: How are you using digital health in your practice? Have you practiced telemedicine? Are you considering the use of mHealth? Tell us in a comment below or on the AMA Facebook.