Everyone and everything is being connected. That’s simply the road ahead for all of us. Consider the following: At the 2015 Consumer Electronics Show, connected devices emerged as all the rage – with manufacturers striving to meet consumers’ demand to measure, track and better understand everything from energy use, to fitness to driving habits.¹ In fact, there are now more devices than people in the world, according to 2014 data from SMA Intelligence.²

This desire to connect is not lost on healthcare industry constituents. In fact, the need to keep patients and healthcare providers closely coupled at various points along the healthcare journey is more pronounced than ever before. To succeed in this new world, however, is not so simple, and requires leaders to get beyond the connected health buzz.

To move toward a deeper understanding of this evolving concept, Validic, a Durham, N.C.-based company that offers a cloud-based technology platform that provides access to digital health data, and HIMSS Media recently gathered a group of healthcare leaders together to discuss just what lies ahead for organizations that are looking to leverage connected health in an effort to enhance the care experience, improve outcomes and reduce costs. During a webinar entitled “The Road Ahead in Connected Health: Technology-Driven Healthcare Has Arrived,” Brian Carter, senior director and general manager of personal health at Cerner Corporation; Drew Schiller, chief technology officer and co-founder of Validic; and Jonathan Linkous, CEO of the American Telemedicine Association, explored the definition of connected health, why the market is poised for growth – and most importantly how healthcare organizations can strategically navigate an array of challenges as they strive to move the clinical care quality needle forward.
Connected Health: coming into focus

Telemedicine, remote monitoring, mobile smartphone apps and a host of other technologies are offering new ways for healthcare provider organizations, clinicians and patients to stay connected. In the process, these technologies also are producing a plethora of potentially useful data.

The true meaning of connected health extends far beyond the simple adoption of the various devices, though, according to Carter. “It’s a term that means that everybody involved in your health and care is plugged in with each other. They all know what’s happening and what they need to do about it. So, it’s a broad term because it’s not just about device connectivity or telemedicine, per se. Those are important parts of connected health, but it is really about much more,” Carter said.

Linkous agreed that connected health is all about having the ability to improve care through better connectivity, not necessarily about the technology, in and of itself. “Connected health includes an increasingly broad array of activities that rely on technology and data to strengthen the quality of care,” Linkous said.

Schiller added that when considering the definition of connected health, leaders and clinicians should focus more on what connected health can accomplish than on what it “is.” “Connected care facilitates patient-to-physician and patient-to-caregiver communication. As a result, it effectively helps to drive toward the triple aim in health care of improving the quality of care, improving outcomes and lowering the cost of delivering care,” Schiller said.

Connected Health: a market poised for growth

Fortunately, healthcare professionals and patients alike are discovering the power of connected health, acknowledging that being joined through technology offers the potential for far better care than simply engaging in periodic meetings, according to Schiller.

For instance, many people with hypertension monitor their blood-pressure readings daily – record them – and then provide a record of these readings at doctors’ appointments, which typically occur annually or every three or six months. The recorded information proves valuable, as the physician can adjust drug doses and therapy recommendations based on trends in the data. But if the patient can connect with the physician on an on-going basis, the value of the data multiplies exponentially. For example, if blood-pressure readings are sent to the physician on a daily or weekly basis via a telemedicine connection or a smart phone app, then the physician could make more timely – and, therefore, more effective – adjustments to the patient’s medications.

This burgeoning recognition of connected health’s potential is just one factor that is driving growth in the market, however, according to Carter. “The industry needs more healthcare professionals and we’re seeing more chronic diseases popping up all the time. We have a baby boomer population that is going to be increasing the amount of care that they need. Access in rural areas is an ongoing challenge,” Carter said. “All of these things have come together to increase the demand for connected health.”
What’s more, the connected health market is expanding because reimbursement is finally becoming more favorable. “For many years within telemedicine, the mantra was we have to expand reimbursement, particularly Medicare reimbursement, so telemedicine would be allowed under fee-for-service plans,” Linkous said. “We still have to fight that fight but, with time, several things have changed. Certainly, private payers and vendors and employers and even Medicaid services have started to reimburse telemedicine.”

The move toward value-based care models also bodes well for the future of connected health. “The acceleration of payment for value rather than payment under fee for service is also bolstering the market,” Linkous said. “Once you move into managed care or capitated care models or medical homes, a lot of the issues with reimbursement go away,” he added. Indeed, under these models, organizations are financially reimbursed based on the outcomes achieved. And, if telemedicine or other connected devices improve outcomes, then healthcare providers will naturally want to invest in and leverage such technology.

Connected Health: overcoming challenges

While interest in connected health is running high and the market is growing at a quick clip, healthcare leaders still face a daunting challenge: finding a way for their organizations to actually implement successful initiatives that bring clinical and financial results. That is, they need to get beyond the novelty of the various technologies – and ensure that the use of connected health translates to improved care and reduced costs.

To do so, healthcare leaders need to make sure that:

1. **Connected health fits into providers’ preferred workflow.** As such, leaders should ensure that it is easy for clinicians to actually integrate the use of various connected devices into the delivery of care, Carter pointed out.

   “At the end of the day, the doctors and other clinicians need to have this technology deeply imbedded into their workflow,” Carter said. “If a doctor, for example, is using a tool to chart about a patient and take notes, that’s the same place that the doctor should see the biometric data that is being tracked at home, and the same place that the doctor should be able to launch a video visit with the patient. The clinicians don’t want nine different applications with nine different user names. They want it all in one location.”

   The data created from connected health is easy to leverage. To truly benefit, clinicians will need to act upon the data that is collected from the various devices.

   The problem: “This data is often presented in an iPad app or in an iPhone app and it’s not something that is part of the electronic medical record system that clinicians use on a daily basis,” Carter said. Fortunately, however, some vendors, such as Cerner, are “working with companies…to actually bring the data into the system in a huge way.”
The big picture is always on the radar. Currently, many innovators are zeroing in on finding ways for consumers to tap into technology to stay more connected. But they need to broaden their focus, according to Carter.

“Thinking about what they expect to happen downstream and how they expect those things to contribute to the bigger clinical picture is probably something really important for them to focus on. The other thing that most device manufacturers need to recognize is that they are part of a bigger ecosystem. It’s very unlikely that an individual is only using this one device or app. They have to think about how the technology fits into a complete set of tools that can help an individual and their care team really manage their health,” Carter said.

The focus of connected health initiatives needs to remain on the end-goal, not on the means. Most importantly, however, healthcare leaders should never lose sight of the ultimate goal, which is to improve the care experience, enhance outcomes and reduce costs.

“We are a little bit in danger of letting the technology rule what we are doing. We need to focus on the ultimate goal, which is providing healthcare services that will bring improved results. We need to make sure that the technology is used as the tool in this mission,” Linkous concluded.

References