Pharmacy Automation and Technology

Identifying and Addressing Technology Challenges Among Older Adults

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It is sometimes surprising to learn about the challenges patients face in maintaining health and wellness. Many of their challenges are things we may not commonly consider. Additionally, our preconceived ideas of what a patient experiences can often be off the mark. This month, we explore the segment of the population that is most commonly encountered in US hospitals.

Have you ever been sick? If you answered “no,” we would love to talk to you to learn your secret; our e-mails are at the end of this article. Otherwise, we expect that most – if not everyone – reading this likely scoffed at our question with a hearty “of course.” The reality is that health and wellness challenges (as we will call them) are constantly encountered in our daily activities. The media does a thorough job of keeping us informed about the latest challenges to healthy living. These challenges are not necessarily found exclusively in our environment, however, as some are found in our genes. These challenges can be much more difficult to pinpoint and address.

Regardless of the source of the challenges we face to better health, we know that, in general, we are confronted with more challenges as we get older. A quick stroll through the halls of any general medical-surgical facility in this country will demonstrate that the majority of patients are 65 years of age or older. In fact, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show a more than doubling in the rate of hospitalization for individuals over 65 compared to those 45 to 64 years old. Clearly, it is important to address health and wellness issues in this segment of the population.

When thinking about the “over 64” crowd, we may be tempted to classify them as Luddites (see the July-August 2014 column) when it comes to general information technology use. And while many of us can easily identify those older adults in our

lives who have been broadly hesitant, or even resistant to technology, we are beginning to see that this generalization is not completely accurate. We remember in the mid-1990s to mid-2000s when we literally received 2 to 3 AOL CDs in the mail each week. *PC World* readers actually named this practice of mass CD mailing as the most annoying tech product ever. Such a waste! Meanwhile, the older adults in our lives were also receiving these CDs, and we remember stories of large numbers of older adults accessing AOL's services and bogging down their systems. The point is that older adults' disdain for technology does not necessarily apply across the board.

We have data to support our personal observations that the older adult segment of the population is not exclusively composed of technophobes; in fact, some are even technophiles. For these data, we turn to a proven source of current, valid research on trends in the US population. The Pew Research Center Internet and American Life Project (www.pewinternet.org) conducts surveys on how the Internet impacts American lives. In a recent survey, Pew identified 2 distinct groups among the older adult population in terms of technology usage.¹ Among the older adult population, those who are older and less affluent are often “physically and psychologically” disconnected from digital tools and services. In many cases, this group of the population has health or disability issues that impact their use of technology. The other group of older adults, which is composed of those who are younger, better educated, and more

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affluent, positively view technology and have many tools at their disposal.

Drilling down into the results, we find that physical and health issues pose distinct challenges for 2 in 5 older adults, directly impacting their ability to read or to participate in activities of daily living. Overall, this group is less likely to go online, have broadband Internet access at home, or to own common digital technologies. For this portion of the older adult population, many of the tools your institution has implemented or is considering implementing that can be used to engage patients may not provide any real value. For example, online portals, app-based communication, home monitoring devices, and even SMS messaging may miss the mark for those who do not have Internet access or cannot read. The digital divide does still exist for this group of patients, and its implications should be carefully considered in the implementation of any technology-based solutions. Some data suggest that phone calls are effective at reducing unnecessary readmissions. Could low-tech solutions such as the traditional phone call be best in this group of patients?

To adopt technology, older adults need the tools (ie, Internet access) and skills (ie, reading ability), but these are not the only factors influencing technology use. Other challenges include skepticism and difficulty with learning to use new technology. It seems logical that those who currently do not use the Internet are skeptical about the importance of Internet access, and this was found in the Pew report. Additionally, fewer than 20% of respondents indicated feeling comfortable learning to use new technology without

assistance. This segment of older US adults may not adopt technology just because it is available.

We have a multifaceted challenge, which requires a multifaceted solution. Although providing broadband access at a patient's home or teaching someone to read in the short time they are in the hospital are not within the pharmacists' capabilities, their awareness of the challenges that patients face can impact the actions they take. For example, for a patient who cannot read and does not have Internet access at home, the discharge process can include visual education tools that do not require reading. These tools can be low tech and paper-based or high-tech videos. Patients who can read but do not have Internet access can be referred to local libraries or community centers that provide free Internet access. Involving more tech-savvy family members and friends in the caregiving process is another possibility. The range of measures to address the challenges of technology use among older adults is as broad as the challenges themselves. The good news is that the Pew report found that 71% of older adults who use the Internet go online every day, or almost every day. We welcome your experiences of what has and has not worked in addressing the use of technology tools by older adults (Brent, foxbren@auburn.edu; Bill, felkebg@auburn.edu).

REFERENCE

1. Pew Research Center Internet and American Life Project. Older adults and technology use. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/>. Accessed July 9, 2014. ■