

# Ushering in the E-PATIENT ERA

*For the true era of e-patients to arrive, we need to understand where they are on their journey and leverage technology that is both easier and better for them.*

**H**as the era of the e-patient really arrived? And by “e-patient,” we mean those individuals who actively participate in their health and are equal partners with doctors, payors, and pharma. Not surprised it’s not here yet? Neither are we, because part of the problem lies with us.

## Understanding the e-Patient Movement

Initially, marketers and their agencies believed in the philosophy of “if you build it, they will come.” And build it we did. We created websites that talked, played music, and could be seen on mobile devices. We offered patients the ability to buy earbuds that could measure their heart rate or a pill bottle that would audibly remind them to take their medicine. We thought these technology advances would herald the engaged e-patient era.

Payors are also tapping into the e-patient promise. Aetna has been beefing up CarePass, a health and wellness digital platform that offers users more than 20 apps, including medical records tracking, prescription monitoring, stress reduction coaching, and more. In Colorado, Kaiser has a 12,000-patient pilot program using its My Health Manager platform, an integrated healthcare system with electronic health records linked to Kaiser’s own pharmacy. These payors believe in giving consumers every tool that technology offers them. Yet, the e-patient era remains stagnant.

## Reliance on Technology as the Answer

The fact is, none of us has yet succeeded in helping to shape the e-patient. Part of the problem is that we relied on technology as answers and not as tools to help us. Our “digital first” thirst usurped a true understanding of what patients needed. Just because a device reminds patients to take their meds doesn’t mean they will actually listen and do it.

## The Journey Toward Wellness

Knowing that part of the problem lies

with us, how do we start to resolve it? For a moment, let’s set technology aside and truly look at the patients and their journey toward wellness. Let’s ask ourselves three key questions:

### 1. Where is the patient in her journey?

Is her journey to wellness just beginning or has she been on this path for some time and encountered multiple obstacles? What is her emotional state at this juncture of her journey? Emotion is key because it helps us know whether the patient is motivated to do well or dejected and in need of support from us.

### 2. What forms of technology are appropriate to use?

Marketers cannot rely on digital products as strategic initiatives. They are tactics and are simply vehicles that are part of a grander plan — the brand strategy. Let’s accept that, then look at which forms of technology best help patients on their journey. While it’s true that most people today use multiple devices to access information, there needs to be synergy and a carefully thought-out plan on how technology can enhance the journey. Otherwise, it’s like throwing spaghetti against the wall and watching it fall.

### 3. Are the technologies easier and better?

Technology should solve patients’ problems with simplicity, not increase their burden. The digital fork is an example of what doesn’t work. It vibrates when individuals eat too fast. But what if they have a penchant for pizza or burgers? Where’s the fork now? Sitting in a drawer most likely.

For patients to love the products we create, and to actually use them, means choosing the technology that will make it easier and better for them. Consider MyFitnessPal. The app “knows” the calorie count of practically every brand of canned green beans on the market and remembers the foods and exercises that people initially enter. Tracking and monitoring have never been easier. And better.

## What Tomorrow Brings

With technology development accelerating

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at lightning speed, patients are being surrounded by new products and devices they can easily access and take along on their journey. Apple’s new HealthKit and Health apps will likely accelerate the use of wearable devices. That’s not to say our job will necessarily be easier.

For the era of e-patients to truly arrive, we need to understand where they are on their journey and leverage technology support that is both easier and better for them. Otherwise, the tools we develop will just be “stuff” we throw in the kitchen drawer. Along with the digital fork. **PV**

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