



For Addiction Experts, mHealth Has Its Advantages And Drawbacks

October 26, 2017 - mHealth may prove to be a critical tool in addressing the national opioid epidemic, but a panel discussion at the **Connected Health Conference** made it clear that digital health devices might sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help.

Mobile device and mHealth platforms can help friends, family and healthcare providers **connect with someone in an addiction crisis** and help him/her cope with stress, but those same devices sometimes increase the user's isolation and loneliness.

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“Will technology [help] the addiction or will it exacerbate the isolation?” asked Lipi Roy, MD, a professor at the NYU School of Medicine’s Department of Public Health.

“There are pluses and minuses,” added Michael Botticelli, executive director of Boston Medical Center’s newly launched Grayken Center for Addiction Medicine.

On a day when President Donald Trump made the long-anticipated declaration that **the nation’s opioid addiction epidemic is a public health emergency** – a move that, among other things, eases mHealth and telemedicine restrictions under certain situations— a packed conference room gathered to discuss the benefits of digital health in helping people with addiction issues.

Led by Roy, the panel discussed how the

smartphone can be used to connect a person with addiction issues to resources – information, family and friends or caregivers – at any time and place. It also gives healthcare providers a platform to push resources out to patients who are often hesitant or ashamed to seek help.

“I feel it’s finally giving them a notion about how to mobilize themselves,” said Christopher Wilkins, Sr., president and CEO of CHES Mobile Health, a Rochester, N.Y.-based developer of mHealth tools for addiction recovery and relapse issues.

mHealth platforms can also help healthcare providers create an atmosphere for collaboration that doesn’t necessarily target abstinence, but an improvement in lifestyle. Imagine a counselor working with someone with addiction issues who cuts his or her drug or alcohol intake in half in a month’s time, thanks to daily reinforcement through an mHealth app. That’s a step in the right direction.

“We’re trying to meet people where they’re at,” Roy pointed out.

But mHealth devices can cause as much harm as good. The panelists pointed out that someone can use a smartphone to shield oneself from society, communicating by text or e-mail instead of by phone or in person.

Emily Lindemer, PhD, co-founder of Hey Charlie, an mHealth app for targeting opioid addiction, said mHealth platforms can be beneficial if they help someone with

addiction issues to connect with friend and family in times of stress. She’s not a fan, however, of apps that can put people in contact with strangers.

“We actually don’t connect you with somebody you don’t know,” she said, highlighting the challenges of working with a vulnerable population.

And that’s the challenges going forward.

“Technology is going to give us a way to reach these underserved people,” she said, pointing out that providers can use these platforms to identify people who are isolating themselves even as they’re using devices to separate themselves from society.

The trick lies in creating programs that make these people feel less isolated.

The need is there. Roy pointed out that some 23 million Americans deal with substance abuse issues, be it drugs, alcohol or tobacco, yet only 10 percent access treatment. And too many people, she said, still treat people with addictions as criminals rather than people with a chronic disease.

“We haven’t really done a good job of treating it like a disease,” Botticelli added.

So while President Trump has elevated the opioid addiction crisis to a national emergency, those working in the trenches to help people with addiction issues say they’ll balance the advantages of mHealth and telehealth with a wary eye. Technology can be both a help and a hindrance.