Healthcare HQ™ Trendwatch

Topic: Healthcare HQ

Assoc. Keyphrase: Healthcare industry trends.

Summary:
Healthcare HQ™ Trendwatch spotlights trending developments in the medical industry and offers strategic insight for data optimization in response.

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Here are 3 key trends Healthcare HQ™ is watching right now:

Trend #1: Doctor Demand is Down

The Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 highlighted the real possibility that medical resources could be overwhelmed to the point of inability. The general thinking was something along the lines of, "There'll be too many sick people and not enough doctors, nurses, and hospital beds." Ensuing national quarantine and social distancing efforts mitigated that concern in most instances—but there was a second, unexpected result:

People stopped seeking medical help.

Ten weeks after the United States declared COVID-19 a national concern, researchers conducted a cross-sectional study of emergency departments in Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and North Carolina. Examining data from 24 providers and five healthcare systems, they found that patient visits to emergency rooms declined between 41% and 62% (41.5% in Colorado up to 61.5% in New York).

Additionally, emergency treatment for serious medical issues also declined to dangerous levels, including:

23% decline in heart attack patients
20% decline in stroke victims
10% decline in patients suffering hyperglycemic crisis

A related study by the Department of Veterans Affairs reported comparable findings, and this news has experts worried. Given the known prevalence of conditions like heart disease and stroke in America, it's unlikely that people simply stopped suffering—and most likely that "people suffer[ed] at home instead of coming into the emergency room."

What's more, a similar phenomenon exists in preventative care and doctor visits outside of hospitals. For instance, one 2020 study showed that screenings for cervical, breast, and

colorectal cancer, as well as mammograms, colonoscopies, and Pap smears dropped by an astonishing 80% and more.

In addition to the human toll on patients, providers are feeling a financial crunch as well. NPR reported over a million healthcare jobs lost, and the Washington Post documented an 18% annualized decline in healthcare. That decreased spending has providers reeling, prompting the Post to make this ominous warning: "The healthcare industry is suffering a historic collapse in business that is emerging as one of the most powerful forces hurting the U.S. economy and a threat to a potential recovery."

Data Optimization Strategies for Healthcare Providers:

» It's time to enhance tracking and efficiency of absentee patient monitoring, especially in regard to high-risk conditions such as heart attack, stroke, and hyperglycemia. Consider implementing a Power BI dashboard that isolates and reports on these patients in a single, at-a-glance window for quick response and proactive contact.

» Employ practices to improve patient satisfaction and alleviate obstacles to seeking medical help. Make it easy for your patients to see their doctor by removing any excuse to stay away. Target efficiencies in your KPI reporting that give instant access to process functions such as office scheduling, maintaining viable third-available appointments, and advance warning of factors that might lead to subpar patient experience.

TREND #2: TELEHEALTH IS BOOMING

A more hopeful consequence of the 2020 pandemic has been to shine a bright light on non-contact medicine, specifically telehealth, as a viable means for treating patients. Although telemedicine is not new and has been growing steadily, before March 2020 it had been mostly a practice pushed to the fringes of provider services. No more—and it probably never will be again.

In 2019 telehealth as an industry generated a very healthy, estimated $5.6 billion in annual revenue and boasted a projected five-year growth rate of 24%. Then the pandemic hit and remote medicine was an immediate beneficiary of the new world order. Previous restrictions on remote-access healthcare that had been obstacles to growth were instantly eliminated, at least temporarily. Harris Williams, a global private equity investment bank, reports:

» "Medicare has expanded telehealth visit reimbursement coverage beyond limited-access rural communities and has increased reimbursement to equal that of an in-person visit. Private insurers are following suit."

» "U.S. Health and Human Services has encouraged discretion in collecting copays" for virtual visits, creating the possibility of either lower, or no-cost patient copay requirements for telehealth services.

» "The U.S. government also lifted the requirement that providers conduct an initial in-person exam before electronically prescribing a controlled substance. In particular, this boosts the use of telehealth in the psychological and behavioral health sectors."

These factors and more are fueling widespread—and fast—adoption of telehealth as an everyday medical function. Examples of this are popping up in places like the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's (UPMC), where its telehealth ambulatory care system surpassed all of 2019's visit volume in just in two days of 2020. Additionally, in March 2020, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts saw its telemedicine-related claims increase by more than 5100% over its 2019 monthly average.

This indicates that telehealth is not only here to stay, but also now on a bullet-speed trajectory that could possibly make it the preferred method for provider services in America—with or without a pandemic looming in the background.

Data Optimization Strategies for Healthcare Providers:

» Implement ROI tracking specific to telehealth expenses. The temptations in a boom environment such as this are twofold: a) Ignore the trend and watch revenue-producing populations decline as trend-adoption increases, or b) Invest carelessly in pursuit of the boom, and watch expenditures outpace results. A data visualization tool based on root-cause analysis metrics will point clearly toward which investments have future value, and which ones don't.

» Target analysis to factors that influence "the new normal." Joshua Klenk, lead data architect as Blue Margin Inc., observes, "Adapting to the new normal of telehealth should include analysis of patient adoption, provider availability, and payment/reimbursement parity between telehealth and in-person visits. Analysis should surround utilization of telehealth services against same-time-frame prior year in-person services. This should also include trending on overall reimbursement, accounting for whether the organization is fee-for-service, value-based reimbursement, or a mixture of both."

TREND #3: HEALTHCARE DATA BREACHES ARE ON THE RISE

"You need to take us seriously. If we'll release on our blog student records/data, I'm 100% sure you will lose more than our price what we ask."

That was the grammar-challenged message administrators received from hackers who were blocking access to servers used by the department of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California at San Francisco. The ransomware attack came in June 2020—while the department was working feverishly to try to create a vaccine for COVID-19. The tense situation was eventually resolved, but not without cost—and the reminder that any health organization, anywhere, is a potential victim of the next attack.

Bloomberg Businessweek reports, "In some ways, Covid-19 has turbocharged the ransomware business that has proliferated, especially in Russia and Eastern Europe, over the past several years. The pandemic has made high-value targets out of universities, hospitals, and labs with access to data that are used to analyze new potential treatments or document the safety of vaccine candidates."

Still, even before the pandemic, ransomware attacks on healthcare were already rising exponentially. In 2009, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services (Office for Civil Rights), only 18 health organizations were involved in criminal data breaches. By 2019 that number had skyrocketed to 429—an increase of 2,283%.

That unhappy trend means healthcare providers face increasing daily risk of compromise in the critical information that they keep.

Data Optimization Strategies for Healthcare Providers:

» Insist on staying current with data best practices every single day. Klenk advises, "Making data actionable to multiple audiences while maintaining security is a critical challenge to overcome. The goal is to ensure high availability and strong security, which involves following and implementing industry best practices. Choose infrastructure that ensures data is encrypted in-transit and at rest. Enforce audience access choices by enabling row-level security. Keep data security top of mind and at the core of your optimization approach."

» Implement a bi-annual data security review that seeks to ensure the latest best-practice compliance standards for your data architecture. Assess your structure for any security-related issues, establish risk levels for any potential issue, and make informed decisions about how you will mitigate any significant risks. You can perform this review in-house every six months, or hire a consultant to guide your team in creating and ensuring safer architecture models for your data.

Additional reporting for this article was contributed by Joshua Klenk, MCSE, MCSA

Three Key Thoughts:

1. "Given the known prevalence of conditions like heart disease and stroke in America, it's unlikely that people simply stopped suffering—and most likely that 'people suffer[ed] at home instead of coming into the emergency room.'"

2. "Telehealth is not only here to stay, but also now on a bullet-speed trajectory that could possibly make it the preferred method for provider services in America."

3. "In some ways, Covid-19 has turbocharged the ransomware business that has proliferated, especially in Russia and Eastern Europe."

For Further Reading:

» Healthcare HQ™
» How to Compare Business Intelligence Software

Schedule a demo with a Blue Margin data expert

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