

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Use of Mobile Health Apps Expected To Skyrocket, Sparking Rise of New Questions

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TEXT:

I'm Kelly Wilkinson with a look at recent predictions about the skyrocketing use of health care applications on smart phones ... and questions raised by their growing popularity. This is a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation.

Health care experts and providers focused on mobile health, or mHealth, have long predicted a revolution as more health care providers and patients use smart phones. Now, a recent report predicts the size of that revolution: In the next five years, an estimated 1.4 billion people will use smart phones worldwide. And, more than one out of every three people with a smart phone will have a health-related app on their phone.

Those numbers come from research2guidance, a research and consulting company that specializes in the mobile market. Managing Director Ralf-Gordon Jahns says the vastness of the market should make traditional health care players snap to attention.

(Jahns): "They should become aware of the fact that in 2015, there are more than a billion potential patients or customers out there which have a small computer always with them. They should think about the possibilities, what that means."

So far, that has meant apps that fall into two categories. Consumer-focused apps can help individuals stay healthy or lose weight. For example, simple text-based apps can remind people of appointments or to take their medications.

The other category is apps used by health care providers. Those can include apps that reference drugs, check drug interactions and identify pills.

Brian Ahier is the health IT evangelist at Mid-Columbia Medical Center in Oregon and chair of the state's Health Information Technology Oversight Council's Technology Workgroup.

(Ahier): "We've got younger doctors recently graduated from med school that are chomping at the bit to use some of these new technologies. The industry is slowly pivoting towards embracing this. And I think that we're going to see paradigm shift over the next two to five years in the industry."

Along with the potential, that shift raises a lot of questions.

The Obama administration is encouraging and investing in widespread adoption of electronic health records. Ultimately, mHealth enthusiasts say information from cell phone apps could become part of EHRs.

But integrating all that information might be tricky. Peter Waegemann is vice president of mHealth Initiative, an organization that promotes mHealth applications.

(Waegemann): "In most cases, there are major problems. CIOs don't even know what applications their docs and their nurses and their practitioners are doing. So we really have a major disconnect and we don't know how that will be overcome in the near future."

There are also confidentiality and security questions, as well as questions about who will pay for the new technology.

According to the research2guidance report, the dominant business model for mHealth developers now relies on the cost of downloads. But that business model will shift, Jahns says, as sophisticated apps become more widely used.

He uses the example of an app that can integrate cell phones with Web-based software and EHRs to allow diabetes patients to better manage their care.

(Jahns): "So they don't have to go home, for example, to check their blood sugar level. They can do that with the help of a smart phone. And then they send the glucose level to a central database or a central doctor station and then they get feedback on how they should change the level of insulin. And they can do that from everywhere they are."

Jahns says consumers will be willing to pay for that kind of convenience, even if costs \$25 or \$50 a month.

A recent survey backs him up. PriceWaterhouseCoopers' Health Research Institute recently found 40% of consumers would be willing to pay monthly fees for remote monitoring devices that allow them to send data to their doctors.

As these apps appear more and more frequently in doctor's offices and hospitals, FDA is taking a closer look at apps used by health care professionals. Again, Brian Ahier.

(Ahier):"The FDA kinda has its eyes on the medical app stores. And so, is a smart phone a medical device that needs to be regulated by the FDA? And FDA involvement would obviously complicate the app development process."

Even with regulatory questions, there is consensus about the potential of the emerging market. Especially as the tech-savvy younger generations become the patients and providers of the future.

This has been a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at ihb@chcf.org. I'm Kelly Wilkinson. Thanks for listening.