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The Emergent Role of Digital Navigators: Case Examples

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Abstract. Recent years have been marked by technological growth in the healthcare sectors without the necessary support to guide users towards effective digital tool utilization. To address this challenge, the Digital Navigator role was established. This paper will provide a brief overview of the role and describe the key ways in which it lays a foundation for the success of digital health interventions.

Keywords. Digital health, user engagement, mobile health apps, mental health, implementation science, health information technology, health human resources

1. Introduction

Health technologies play an increasingly important role in clinical settings. Utilization of patient portals, virtual care tools, wearable devices, and mobile apps among many other health technologies continues to grow, not only in Canada but globally [1-3]. Interest in digital tools is rapidly expanding due to technological advancements, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), and piqued user interest in leveraging these tools to manage their health [3]. Digital tools can serve to bridge existing gaps in healthcare access, allowing users to reap the benefits of customized and data-driven care.

In an evolving digitally connected healthcare environment, the use of patient-facing technologies in clinical care has created new user tasks requiring administrative and technical support [1,2]. Many prospective users lack requisite technological skills, have limited digital literacy, or are reluctant to use digital tools due to trust and privacy concerns regarding potential misuse of their personal health data [3-5]. These barriers need to be addressed before these digital modalities for care can be rendered effective for users. Unfortunately, due to significant health human resource (HHR) staffing challenges, health professionals do not have the time or capacity to take on the additional workload of supporting users in the selection, onboarding, training, troubleshooting and engagement with these technologies [6]. Not only are these tasks not traditional clinical responsibilities, but some health professionals do not have the technical competencies required to provide meaningful assistance [7,8]. As a result, a new role on the clinical team, Digital Navigators, has been established to support clinicians and patients in using digital technologies in clinical settings. The following paper aims to describe the findings from two case studies in which Digital Navigators were piloted in two clinical contexts.

2. Overview of the Digital Navigator Role

Digital Navigators play a key part in addressing the challenges created by the increasing prominence of technologies in care settings. Digital Navigators are staff working alongside the clinical team, who support, train and educate patients, care partners and health professionals in selecting, navigating, and utilizing patient-facing digital technologies in a clinical setting [9]. Digital Navigators are distinct from other established roles such as Clinical Informatics Nurses and IT Analysts, such that their focus is on supporting patients, care partners and health professionals in effectively adopting and using patient-facing technologies (i.e., mobile apps, wearable devices, etc.) as opposed to focusing on clinical and operational use of health technologies and systems (i.e., electronic health records, telehealth platforms etc.) to meet functional healthcare delivery needs and optimize workflows. Digital Navigators serve as an additional point of contact, allowing time-constrained healthcare professionals to focus on providing patient care rather than supporting patients in their use of digital technologies. For example, Digital Navigators may support troubleshooting of technology issues and digital literacy skills building to facilitate meaningful use and adoption of patient-facing digital technologies in clinical settings [9,10].

Although there is variation in the responsibilities assigned to Digital Navigators, their role generally encompasses the functions outlined below.

2.1. Training and Technical Support

Digital Navigators help to educate health professional-, patient-, and care partner- users by offering guidance and training on various available digital tools (i.e., patient portals, mobile apps, virtual care platforms, wearable devices, etc.). Additionally, Digital Navigators can provide technical support and guidance on how to use common features and components of digital tools. They can also support users in troubleshooting technological issues they may experience (e.g., connecting to wi-fi). Digital Navigators can teach users how to meaningfully interact with digital interventions beyond the initial download or onboarding; providing instruction on how to effectively use these tools.

Essentially, Digital Navigators play a key role in building digital literacy skills by supporting users in overcoming common technological hurdles, making it easier for them to adopt and engage with digital technologies [10].

2.2. Digital Health Literacy and Data Privacy Education

Digital Navigators can help to enhance the digital and health literacy of patients and care partners by supporting their understanding of the health information requested, provided, or generated by digital tools [11]. Digital Navigators work to make digital communication more accessible by ensuring content is clearly understood. For instance, they may translate complex medical terminologies into user-friendly language, provide simpler explanations for complicated medical information, or help patients understand health data trends generated by the digital tool.

Digital Navigators can help to ensure that users understand the significance of maintaining high standards of privacy and security when utilizing digital health tools. Through their role, they can educate users on the importance of data protection and best practices for maintaining their privacy [12].

2.3. Patient Engagement and Workflow Optimization

Digital Navigators enable users to be active participants in their care by empowering patients and their care partners to engage with digital health tools. They have an astute understanding of user behaviors and can promote optimal use of these technologies by guiding and encouraging users to engage with digital tools, thereby sustaining prolonged use of the intervention and ensuring maximum benefits are achieved [10,11].

Digital Navigators can support clinicians in integrating digital technologies into their clinical workflows. They can identify challenges, barriers, and pain points, and recommend ways to successfully integrate digital tools into care in order to better support clinicians and patients in engaging with digital tools in a manner that can benefit both user groups.

3. Case Examples in Canada

3.1. Implementation of a Mobile Health App in an Outpatient Mental Health Clinic

Digital Navigators played an instrumental role in the implementation of the App4Independence (A4i) mobile app within an outpatient clinic at the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction (CAMH) in Toronto, Canada [13,14]. The A4i app was designed to support the schizophrenia and psychosis recovery process by facilitating anonymous peer-to-peer patient connection, offering care reminders, and improving care coordination. Two project staff took on the role of Digital Navigators to support the integration of the A4i app into existing clinical workflows. They supported recruitment and onboarding of eligible patients and health professionals in addition to facilitating app onboarding, and providing ad-hoc technical support. Digital Navigators on the team also helped to develop customized app educational materials and hosted digital literacy training sessions to support patients unfamiliar with using smartphone devices. Additionally, the Digital Navigators gathered evaluation data through user experience surveys and brief user interviews to improve the app implementation process.

3.2. An International Partnership to Implement a Suicide Prevention and Safety Planning Mobile Health App in the United Kingdom and Canada

A collaboration between CAMH in Toronto, Canada and the Oxford NHS Trust in Oxford, England aims to utilize Digital Navigators to support the implementation of the Hope App in community and outpatient clinics within these institutions [15]. The Hope App is a digital suicide safety planning tool that offers users the ability to create a personal safety plan with their providers and have access to a digital version of their safety plan when it is needed most. The Hope App provides psychoeducation, resources, and coping strategy techniques such as ‘Boxed Breathing’ for users to easily engage with when experiencing suicidal ideation; keeping them safe during moments of heightened urge to engage in harmful behaviours. This feasibility study will assess the impact and utility of leveraging an innovative app-based modality for safety planning. Project staff will act as informal Digital Navigators, leading the implementation of the app in both the Canadian and English settings. A comprehensive and structured approach will be employed, with custom training materials created to support patient and health professional education. The Digital Navigators will also work alongside the research

team to evaluate the implementation approach and identify best practice implementation strategies. Anticipated responsibilities of Digital Navigators include supporting both patients and health professionals in the app set-up/onboarding, providing orientation to the app's features, and communicating the evidence behind the app to encourage user "buy-in". Identified barriers and facilitators to implementing the Hope App in this setting will be contextualized, leveraging lessons learned to develop tailor implementation strategies [15].

4. Conclusion

As the use of technologies in Canadian healthcare settings continues to grow, Digital Navigators can play a crucial role in supporting effective use and engagement with these technologies. Although this role has yet to be formalized in Canadian clinical contexts, the role has the potential to support patients, care partners and health professionals in leveraging and learning how to use digital health tools to better support care. Despite the benefits of this role, many organizations across Canada are not aware of the role or do not have the capacity or resources to scale the role beyond pilot implementations. Given this, there is a need for additional research to support healthcare organizations and healthcare leaders in understanding the nature of the Digital Navigator role, the requisite credentials or skills a Digital Navigator must have, the funding sources to support this role, reporting and governance structures for the role, and the clinical setting or patient population that would benefit most from the use of Digital Navigators. Digital Navigators can play a crucial role in shaping the digitization of healthcare, ensuring the meaningful use of these innovations, however greater research is needed to formalize, implement and scale the role in clinical contexts.

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