Review

Smart Healthcare: The Role of Digital Health in Modern Medicine

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Review

Smart Healthcare: The Role of Digital Health in Modern Medicine

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Abstract: Digital health is transforming healthcare by integrating advanced technologies , making it more accessible, efficient, and personalized. From electronic health records, telemedicine, wearable devices, artificial intelligence and now smart hospitals digital health is improving patient care and outcomes while reducing the healthcare costs. However, the integration of digital health faces several challenges such as data privacy, cybersecurity risks, and inequitable access to technology. This article attempts to give an overview of the state of digital health at present, key challenges in implementation and potential solutions to maximize the benefits of digital health and ensure efficient, equitable and patient-centered healthcare in future.

Keywords: Digital Health; Healthcare; Implementation; Innovations; Challenges; Solutions

Introduction

The swift progression of technology has revolutionized numerous sectors, with healthcare being no exception. Incorporating digital care into healthcare delivery has revolutionized disease management, especially for specific populations such as cancer patients, patients with chronic illnesses, and the elderly. Digital health, encompassing many technologies designed to better health and healthcare delivery, has improved patient participation, augmented care coordination, and enabled remote monitoring (1).

The notion of digital health has progressed over the last several decades, commencing with the advent of electronic health records in the 1960s (2). The advent of the internet in the late 20th century facilitated the development of advanced digital health solutions, such as telehealth services and online patient portals. The surge of smartphones in the 21st century has significantly expedited the expansion of mHealth applications, allowing patients to oversee their health from their devices conveniently.

However, a core research problem persists: the integration and effectiveness of digital health technologies in real-world clinical settings. Challenges include interoperability between electronic health systems, data privacy and security concerns, the digital divide affecting equitable access, and the need for evidence-based validation of digital interventions. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensuring that digital health solutions are not only innovative but also practical, secure, and beneficial for both patients and healthcare providers.

This article examines the deployment of digital health solutions, emphasizes significant developments, and addresses the challenges in digital health and potential solutions to improve the adoption of these technologies.

Implementation of Digital Health

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Integrating technology into existing healthcare systems by implementing digital health solutions enhances patient care, streamlines operations, and improves health outcomes. The primary elements of this implementation are (Table 1):

Electronic Health Records: Electronic Health Records (EHRs) have emerged as a standard instrument in healthcare environments, facilitating digitizing patient records. They improve data management, enhance communication among healthcare providers, and increase patient safety by making information more accessible. EHRs enhance patient-centered care by providing information on risk factors, including clinical and laboratory data, and allowing patients to monitor their health through digital applications, potentially with clinician supervision and support (3).

Wearable technology: Wearable technology monitors health metrics and delivers real-time data to patients and healthcare providers, including fitness trackers and smartwatches. Wearable devices monitor patients' vital signs, sleep patterns, and physical activity, offering data that informs treatment decisions and supports symptom management (4). Specific wearable devices incorporate functionalities such as electrocardiogram (ECG) monitoring and fall detection. This information may be disseminated to healthcare providers for ongoing monitoring and prompt intervention. Researchers are investigating the integration of augmented reality and artificial intelligence into wearable devices to enhance user experience and facilitate health predictions or personalized recommendations (5,6). Therapeutic devices, including insulin pumps, implantable cardiac pacemakers, and deep brain stimulation devices, are utilized for continuous monitoring and treatment (7).

Telemedicine: The COVID-19 pandemic expedited the implementation of telemedicine, allowing healthcare providers to conduct virtual consultations. This method enhances healthcare accessibility, particularly for individuals in isolated regions or those experiencing mobility challenges. Telehealth services enable patients with chronic conditions to conduct regular check-ups remotely, enhancing access to care and facilitating continuous management of their health issues. Teleoncology has emerged as a critical instrument in the field of oncology. Virtual consultations facilitate oncologists in assessing patients, deliberating treatment alternatives, and overseeing side effects from a distance. Hospital-based telemedicine is rapidly expanding in two domains: stroke management and intensive care unit (ICU) services. Research indicates that practical imaging enables the execution of high-quality stroke examinations remotely. Ancillary telemedicine services, including teleradiology, telepathology, and telepharmacology, are experiencing significant growth (8).

Mobile Health: Mobile health (mHealth) applications enable patients to oversee their health using mobile apps and sensors, either independently or in conjunction with clinical team members and support from friends and family. This encompasses devices that measure novel biomarkers and consumer versions of traditional clinical equipment, such as blood pressure cuffs and spirometers, allowing individuals to collect measurements at their convenience, independent of clinical indications. These applications provide medication reminders, monitor treatment schedules, and deliver educational resources regarding the disease and treatment options, enhancing patient engagement (9).

Artificial Intelligence: Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force in healthcare, providing innovative solutions that enhance the accuracy of disease diagnosis, improve treatment strategies, and predict patient prognosis (10,11). AI tools have enhanced workflow efficiency, reduced patient turnaround time, and increased the accuracy and reliability of patient data. AI has demonstrated efficacy in the interpretation of diverse medical images for disease diagnosis, encompassing pathology slides, various radiographs, retinal scans, and images of skin lesions. Numerous studies indicate that AI can analyze these images with accuracy comparable to, or surpassing, that of experienced clinicians (12). AI exhibits significant sensitivity and specificity in detecting early-stage cancers, frequently surpassing the performance of human radiologists (13). Artificial intelligence has demonstrated potential in diagnosing various conditions, including prostate cancers (notably Gleason scoring) and lung, colon, breast, and skin cancers (14,15,16). Artificial intelligence possesses significant potential for analyzing extensive patient data in cancer genomics, which may yield diagnostic, prognostic, and therapeutic insights (17). Artificial

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intelligence can aid treatment planning and forecast treatment failure in radiation therapy (18). Artificial intelligence can assist in end-of-life decisions, including resuscitation status and the initiation of mechanical ventilation (19). Artificial intelligence technologies are incorporated into wearable devices and mobile health applications, facilitating continuous monitoring of patients with chronic conditions. These tools analyze real-time data and alert healthcare providers when intervention is necessary, facilitating timely adjustments to treatment plans (20,21).

Table 1. The Primary Elements of Digital Health in Healthcare.

The Primary Elements of Digital Health in Healthcare
Electronic Health Records
Wearable Technology, e.g., fitness trackers, smartwatches, insulin pumps.
Telemedicine including Teleoncology, Teleradiology, Telepathology, Telepharmacology
Mobile Health using mobile apps and sensors
Artificial Intelligence

Innovations in Digital Health

Digital health has experienced numerous innovations that enhance patient care and improve healthcare delivery (Table 2). Examples of significance include:

Augmented Artificial Intelligence: "Augmented intelligence" (AI) emphasizes the assistive role of artificial intelligence, highlighting that AI design enhances human intelligence rather than replaces it. Augmented intelligence has the potential to assist in various domains in the future: supporting patient triage according to symptom severity, utilizing ECG for assessing valvular disease progression, automating real-time predictions of optimal therapy for individual patients, analyzing multi-modal wearable data for predicting, detecting, and classifying epileptic seizures, automatically identifying the risk of postpartum hemorrhage hours in advance for all patients, conducting non-invasive genomic analysis of cancer through imaging phenotypes, and predicting the risk of acute illnesses (e.g., pneumonia) earlier than current practices via X-ray analysis. Augmented intelligence can assist staff management, billing accuracy, quality enhancement, education, and research (22,23).

Deep Learning Methods: Deep learning methods are representation learning algorithms that utilize multiple representation levels. These levels are achieved by composing simple, nonlinear modules, transforming the representation from one level to a higher, more abstract level (24). Deep learning can enhance health care through its superior performance, end-to-end learning framework incorporating feature learning, and ability to manage complex and multi-modal data. Deep learning has been utilized to analyze aggregated electronic health records (EHRs), encompassing both structured data (e.g., diagnoses, medications, laboratory tests) and unstructured data (e.g., free-text clinical notes) (25). Deep learning has the capability to predict diseases based on patient clinical status (26). Deep learning is significant in the early detection of cancer. Uhm et al. employed deep learning models to distinguish between the histological subtypes of renal tumors, categorizing them as malignant or benign (27). Deep learning algorithms have shown significant accuracy in early lung cancer diagnosis (28).

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR): VR and AR are innovative technologies in healthcare that are utilized for medical training, patient education, therapeutic interventions, and surgical planning (29). Virtual reality can potentially reduce stress, pain, and anxiety in critical care settings while facilitating coordination, mobilization, and physical and mental rehabilitation (30, 31). Virtual and augmented reality can assist in the planning and execution of intricate cardiovascular procedures (32).

Health Information Exchange (HIE): HIE platforms enable the secure transfer of health and administrative data between diverse healthcare providers. This interoperability improves care coordination, minimizes test duplication, and provides high-quality care (33). HIE provides clinicians with a complete picture of patient health status at the point of care to ensure quality and patient

 doi:10.20944/preprints202502.1549.v1

safety; it may reduce medical cost and duplicative utilization and reduce the administrative burden on patients and clinicians by seamless data flow across the continuum of care (34).

Remote Patient Monitoring (RPM): RPM technologies enable healthcare providers to track patients' health metrics beyond clinical environments. Continuous monitoring facilitates early intervention, decreasing hospital readmissions and enhancing disease management. RPM is primarily beneficial for patients with chronic illnesses and those requiring complex care, such as individuals with cancer (35).

Technology to Reduce Administrative Burdens: Advanced EHRs can alleviate administrative burdens by streamlining documentation, coding, and prior authorizations, allowing physicians to concentrate on addressing patients' medical needs instead of excessive paperwork. This may enhance professional satisfaction and mitigate physician burnout (36). Speech recognition (SR) software facilitates the conversion of voice commands into text, allowing clinicians to reduce the time spent on documentation and increase patient interaction (37).

Blockchain Technology: Blockchain provides a secure and decentralized framework for managing health information and improving data integrity and security. This innovation can enhance patient privacy, health data analytics, biomedical research, and electronic medical records. Blockchain can safeguard healthcare data against risks of data loss, corruption, and security breaches, including ransomware attacks (38).

Digital Informed Consent: Informed consent guarantees that research participants are adequately informed about the specifics of a study and voluntarily decide to take part. The objective of informed consent is to furnish prospective participants with adequate information presented clearly and comprehensibly, enabling them to make an informed decision regarding their participation in the research. Informed consent is vital to patient engagement; however, formalizing this process has introduced particular challenges. Innovative methods, including video consent, smartphone consent, and digital informed consent, are being employed to address these challenges (39).

Ambient Intelligence (AMI) and the Internet of Medical Things (IoMT): Ambient Intelligence (AMI) and the Internet of Medical Things (IoMT) represent a paradigm shift towards intelligent healthcare and smart hospitals. Integrating advanced sensors, actuators, and AI with AMI technology enables remote patient monitoring, telemedicine, virtual consultations, clinical decision-making, assisted living for the elderly, and many more opportunities. The IoMT has led to the generation of electronic health records, allowing seamless sharing of patient data among healthcare providers and enabling collaborative care and proactive patient monitoring (40,41,42). Smart hospitals use IoMT to track patient conditions, improve patient outcomes, manage hospital assets, and optimize resource allocation.

Table 2: Innovations in Digital Health.

Innovations in Digital Health
Augmented Artificial Intelligence
Deep Learning Methods
Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality
Health Information Exchange
Remote Patient Monitoring
Technology to Reduce Administrative Burdens like Advanced EHRs and Speech Recognition
Blockchain Technology
Digital Informed Consent
Ambient Intelligence and The Internet of Medical Things.

Challenges in Digital Health

Although digital health offers numerous advantages, various challenges impede its broad adoption and effective implementation (Table 3).

 doi:10.20944/preprints202502.1549.v1

Data Privacy and Security: This is one of the most prominent digital health challenges. In 2021, over 22.6 million patients were affected by healthcare-related data breaches. Collecting and managing sensitive health data presents significant privacy and security concerns (43). Compliance with regulations like HIPAA is essential for the protection of sensitive information. Digital health technologies can influence patient autonomy, particularly regarding data sharing and consent (44). As per the HIPAA Journal, there has been an upward trend in data breaches over the past 14 years as the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) reported. In 2023, OCR reported a 239% increase in hacking-related data breaches between January 1, 2018, and September 30, 2023, and a 278% increase in ransomware attacks over the same period. In 2019, hacking accounted for 49% of all reported breaches. In 2023, 79.7% of data breaches were due to hacking incidents. Healthcare facilities with limited resources may find it challenging to implement effective cybersecurity protocols, leaving their systems exposed to cyber-attacks and breaches. For example, Indian healthcare faced 1.9 million cyberattacks in 2022 (45). In 2023, the average cost of a healthcare data breach was $10.93 million per incident, the highest across industries as per the IBM Cost of a Data Breach Report 2023.

Lack of Interoperable Health Information Exchange: The lack of interoperability among healthcare facilities and systems may lead to insecure data transfers, increasing errors and risks (46). The Office of the National Coordinator for Health (ONC) tracks the hospitals' overall engagement in four domains of interoperable exchange (send, receive, find, and integrate) to measure the effects of federal policy and industry efforts on interoperability. In 2023, 70% of non-federal acute care hospitals engaged in all domains of interoperable exchange (send, find, receive, and integrate), of which 43% routinely engaged in interoperable exchange, while 27% sometimes engaged in interoperable exchange. Lower-resourced hospitals (i.e., small, rural, critical access, or independent) engaged less frequently in interoperable exchange when compared to their higher-resourced counterparts (47).

Digital Divide: Disparities in technology access have resulted in inequalities within healthcare systems, significantly affecting care accessibility and patient outcomes. These disparities may exist in socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic inequities, geographic locale, age, and education (48). Digital health technology interventions are more effective for individuals already in advantageous positions. This phenomenon is recognized in public health as Intervention-Generated Inequalities (49). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), approximately 45.2 percent of the world's households do not have access to the internet. People below the $30,000 income threshold are more likely to use phones, as opposed to a tablet or laptop, for internet usage due to limited access to broadband internet (50). Rural adults reported less access to telehealth services than non-rural adults, and 75% were willing to use telehealth services, similar to non-rural adults (51). After controlling for median household income, broadband access in majority Black and Hispanic neighborhoods was 10–15% lower than in majority White or Asian neighborhoods (52). Although the adoption rate of digital technology among older adults has recently increased, the digital divide remains an ongoing global challenge for older adults, particularly those with lower socioeconomic status and racial and ethnic minority groups (53).

Digital Literacy: Digital literacy refers to the educational disparities leading to diverse capabilities of individuals, both children and adults, in utilizing digital technologies and comprehending associated risks. It encompasses the technical skills required to utilize and access the internet and the ability to critically and confidently interact with the online environment. 78% of individuals with college degrees use digital health tools compared to only 39% with a high school diploma or less. Digital health literacy has been recognized as a significant factor among the primary social determinants of health due to its impact on broader social determinants of health (54,55).

Regulatory Challenges: The dynamic characteristics of digital health technologies may complicate the regulatory approval process from both product (adaptability, variability, variety, novelty, accessibility) and industry-structural (new entrants, changing roles of actors, new delivery models) perspectives. Regulatory and reimbursement policy uncertainties for digital health services may impede their adoption. Lack of comprehensive policy frameworks, regulatory mechanisms, outdated guidelines, and legal ambiguities have created gaps (56). Weak or absent regulations on insurance coverage for telemedicine and digital health services further limit financial accessibility.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202502.1549.v1

Clear and consistent guidelines are essential for ensuring the safety and efficacy of digital health solutions (57).

Data Processing and Management: The substantial volume of IoMT data demands effective pattern analysis for informed decision-making. While traditional methods rely on manual observation via self-reporting tools such as questionnaires and interviews, big data platforms provide automated frameworks such as MapReduce and Hadoop for parallel and distributed analysis. Tools such as Cascading, Pig, and Hive can aid in handling interrelated data groups, however, selecting the most suitable framework poses a challenge (42).

Personal and Psychological Barriers: These barriers encompass healthcare professionals' resistance to change, challenges in comprehending technology, perceptions of diminished human interaction, technophobia, variations in age, education levels, professional experience, low literacy, inadequate writing skills, linguistic characteristics, adherence behavior, and apprehension regarding the use of health technology. Additional barriers comprised apprehensions regarding the heightened workload and modified workflow, which affect the quality of care provided (58).

Liability and Malpractice: Healthcare providers' increasing reliance on digital health tools for diagnostics and treatment decisions raises pertinent questions regarding liability. Establishing accountability in misdiagnosis or treatment failure associated with digital health technologies can complicate malpractice claims (59).

Table 3. Challenges in Digital Health.

Challenges in Digital Health
Data Privacy and Security
Lack of Interoperable Health Information Exchange
Digital Divide
Digital Literacy
Regulatory Challenges *Data Processing and Management*
Personal and Psychological Barriers
Liability and Malpractice

Potential Solutions to improve the effectiveness of digital health

Addressing the challenges is essential for maximizing the potential of digital health technologies and enhance healthcare accessibility for improved patient outcomes. The potential solutions to address those challenges include (Table 4):

Robust Cybersecurity Protocols: Enhancing cybersecurity protocols, such as end-to-end encryption, access controls, biometric authentication, and regular security audits, is essential for protecting sensitive health information and fostering patient trust. Hospitals should adopt zero-trust security models to prevent unauthorized data access. Addressing these challenges requires more potent encryption methods, stricter compliance with global data protection laws, improved interoperability frameworks, and increased transparency in data usage to ensure trust and security in digital health (44,56).

Data Privacy Regulations and Technology Standardization: Implement regulations to ensure stricter compliance with HIPAA and other healthcare data protection laws to prevent breaches. Standardized protocols for data exchange, including HL7 and FHIR, enhance communication among various digital health systems and improve care coordination. Establishing rigorous standards for developing and validating digital health solutions enhances quality. Promoting clinical trials and studies can yield evidence of efficacy and enhance credibility (46,56).

Addressing digital health equity:

Technology Access and Training Programs: Initiatives aimed at enhancing technology access in rural and underserved communities, including the provision of subsidized devices or internet connectivity, can effectively bridge the digital divide and promote equitable access to digital health

 doi:10.20944/preprints202502.1549.v1

solutions. Community-based digital health training may be provided for low-income and minority groups by offering workshops on telemedicine and patient portals (49).

Equal Health Services Reimbursement: Insurance providers like Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurers to provide equal reimbursement for in-person and telehealth visits (56)

Patient Education and Healthcare Providers Training: Providing education and training for patients and healthcare providers may enhance digital literacy and improve user engagement with digital health tools. User-friendly interfaces may facilitate adoption by ensuring digital health platforms support multiple languages and voice navigation. Offering incentives regularly to patients using wearable devices may enhance the adoption of digital health. Involving healthcare providers in designing and implementing digital health solutions ensures alignment with existing workflows. Continuous training and support can enhance integration processes. Integrating digital health training into curricula in medical schools may provide early education about telehealth services (54,56).

Collaboration at various levels: Collaborating with regulatory bodies to establish clear guidelines for digital health solutions facilitates developers' more straightforward navigation of compliance requirements. Efficient approval processes may foster innovation. Encouraging collaboration among healthcare providers, technology developers, policymakers, and patients can enhance the creation of more effective and user-centered digital health solutions. Multi-stakeholder partnerships facilitate innovation and tackle common challenges (56,58)

Nationwide interoperable health information exchange: While hospitals routinely engaged in interoperable exchange increased by 54 percent since 2018, there is an ongoing need for comprehensive engagement in interoperability across the healthcare continuum to improve nationwide interoperability. To address these gaps, initiatives such as the Trusted Exchange Framework and Common Agreement (TEFCA) are aimed at improving connectivity and minimizing barriers to data exchange are steps forward to help support equitable access to and use of patient health information (60).

Table 4. Potential Solutions to Improve the Effectiveness of Digital Health.

Potential Solutions to Improve the Effectiveness of Digital Health
Robust Cybersecurity Protocols
Data Privacy Regulations and Technology Standardization
Addressing digital health equity by improving technology access, training programs, and equal health services reimbursement
Patient Education and Healthcare Providers Training
Collaboration at various levels, e.g., regulatory bodies, policymakers, technology developers, healthcare providers, and patients.
Nationwide interoperable health information exchange

Conclusions

Digital health is a transformative element in healthcare, providing innovative solutions to enhance patient care and healthcare delivery. Addressing the challenges such as data privacy, digital divide and literacy, and interoperability of healthcare systems, is essential for maximizing the potential of digital health technologies as the field evolves. By implementing digital health **equitable policies, data privacy regulations, standardized protocols, and enhancing patient and healthcare education**, digital health can become **more accessible, secure, and effective** for diverse populations. Overall, the digital health will continue to bridge gaps in healthcare delivery empowering patients and enhancing healthcare accessibility worldwide. A balanced approach is the key to success with collaboration at various levels, including policymakers, healthcare providers, and technology companies, to drive meaningful change in digital healthcare adoption.

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