The Human Touch in Telemedicine

How virtual care serves as a future model for human care and wellbeing
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Profound Revolution
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Virtually every industry is experiencing unprecedented modernization with the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and various machine learning technologies. The world is crossing a historic bridge between human and artificial intelligence, and according to Bill Wilkerson, Executive Chair, Mental Health International and a member of EQ Care’s Independent Advisory Board, "this much is clear. The revolution in AI threatens to displace and replace human beings in whole jobs and specific tasks on an unprecedented scale."¹

Medicine and the delivery in treatment and care is also being impacted. The critical role of the human touch by healthcare practitioners, particularly in times of crisis, ought to be nationally systematized to ensure the practice of medicine includes a human interaction with compassion and empathy.

"AI will revolutionize analyzing data in new ways. Its applications will extend into virtually every aspect of our lives and every area of research," according to Dr. Alan Bernstein, President and CEO of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR).¹ "Together, the revolution in genomics and artificial intelligence are forcing us to re-visit long-held, cherished views of what it means to be human."

Left unchecked, the impact of AI will have a profound effect on the mental health and wellbeing of working populations.

The economic uncertainty provoked by the rise of AI automation will create a parallel mental health crisis, as large swaths of the workforce, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, risk being eliminated or downsized.
Opportunity Cost
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Certain industries are better suited to rely heavily on machine learning, while others will always require a strong and constant human presence. Medicine, practiced in-person or virtually through platforms like EQ Care, is among the few disciplines where human involvement is primordial and must be systematized.

Since connectedness and community are staples of modern life both personally and professionally, it is ironic that isolation and loneliness are now becoming troubling signs of the times. Loneliness can be as deadly as obesity or even smoking, according to a 2015 meta-analysis. ²

"Loneliness has been associated with personality disorders and psychosis, suicide, impaired cognitive performance and cognitive decline over time, increased risk of Alzheimer’s disease, diminished executive control, and increases in depressive symptoms," reported Annals of Behavioral Medicine in 2010.

The effects of social isolation are weighing heavily on Canadians and their ability to cope with stress.

"As Canadians grapple with the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic," reported the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) ³, Canada’s largest mental health teaching hospital, "virtual care visits increased from approximately 350 per month to almost 3,000 per month, an increase of over 750%.”

Bill Wilkerson had been studying increasing isolation shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic and noted last year that it had already presented an impending public healthcare challenge; and in the midst of the pandemic, it is now a parallel health crisis, requiring immediate, broad institutional action.

“Unless employers and governments prepare, by retraining workers, creating replacement jobs that demand distinctly human traits, and forging new education and career models, stress and alienation will intensify in a world already fractured by income inequality and a gaping ‘have-have not’ divide,” wrote Wilkerson in his in his landmark 2019 study, Of Two Minds — One Human, One Not: Mental Health in the Era of Artificial Intelligence. ¹
Human Touch
Human Touch

As the use of AI becomes more commonplace in everyday life, even in the delivery of critical medical care on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, conversations on how to effectively bridge human and machine interaction must be encouraged.

In healthcare, leveraging technology as a tool to connect providers and patients is critical to enabling shorter wait times and faster access to care and treatment options. Technology cannot, however, replace human clinicians helping patients navigate their way through the care continuum, balancing a myriad of potential resources and subtle environmental factors, all the while showing compassion and being acutely aware of the patient’s concerns and mental health.

Studies show that an empathetic, human touch can lead to an “improved patient experience, improved patient adherence to treatment recommendations, better clinical outcomes, fewer medical errors and malpractice claims, and higher physician retention.”

The challenge is keeping compassion and empathy in the healthcare delivery equation, while utilizing the efficiencies of technological innovations to improve the user experience across the continuum of care.
Bridge Over Troubled Waters
Bridge Over Troubled Waters

Our healthcare system is facing an existential crisis and our way of life has been profoundly altered by the current pandemic. Social isolation, contactless commerce and artificial intelligence present real roadblocks to our natural instinct to be humanly connected, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression and other chronic health issues.

We are seeing that a premature overreliance on algorithms can lead to negative outcomes in specialties such as dermatology and other disciplines.  

"No algorithm can completely replace the wisdom, altruism, capacity for inquiry and old-fashioned common sense of a healthcare professional with years of frontline experience," said Daniel Martz, EQ Care’s CEO. "It is incumbent upon us to ensure that, in designing new technology-enabled approaches, we bring together the power of algorithms, including those powered by AI, with the intuition and warmth of the human touch."

Empathy expert Dr. Helen Riess explained that facial displays such as tone of voice, touch, disgust, and pain, allow observers to feel what others feel, confirming that the expression "'I feel your pain' is much more than just a figure of speech."  

"Empathy requires cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and moral capacities to understand and respond to the suffering of others,” wrote Riess, the author of The Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences. "Compassion is a tender response to the perception of another’s suffering. Compassion cannot exist without empathy."
Good judgment and empathy delivered by human beings makes the delicate triage process easier on patients, alleviating their concerns and helping them find the path to recovery most efficiently. EQ Care is the only provider in Canada with live Care Managers at the first point of contact, creating conditions for optimal care from the very beginning of the process.

Doctors who spend an average of three minutes longer per patient are less likely to be sued for malpractice, according to findings by Dr. Wendy Levinson, Professor of Medicine at University of Toronto and lead author of *Understanding Medical Professionalism*. The quality of information given to patients didn’t necessarily differ but what mattered most was how they spoke with their patients.  

It’s the complementarity between the health professional and the technology that will, for the foreseeable future, produce the most optimal outcomes. This is true on the level of the individual, institutionally or across entire healthcare systems.

Virtual care can be so much more than interacting with a physician via text or videoconference – this approach has the potential to instantly redistribute precious human resources within the system, matching capacity with demand, and aiding in the creation of national and even global platforms of healthcare coordination.

At the practical level for Canadians, this means shorter wait times and better access to healthcare services. During the pandemic, when psychological issues related to social isolation are commonplace, efficient access to mental healthcare is particularly crucial.
Angus Reid on Telemedicine Perceptions
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In a national survey of 1,500 Canadians conducted by the Angus Reid Institute in April 2020 for EQ Care, those polled across every demographic studied showed a clear preference for virtual healthcare delivered by human beings.

Four in five respondents preferred face-to-face virtual care, and this remained true even among younger, more tech-savvy Canadians. Only four percent of all respondents preferred interacting with a chatbot, and seven percent among younger generations.  

The Angus Reid Institute also reported that if mental health services were available via virtual care, Canadians polled would be seven times more likely to use such services. Two-thirds of young Canadians would be more willing to use mental health services if available virtually, with over 40 percent reporting they would look more favourably on an employer offering telemedicine to employees.

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The Virtual Healthcare Canadians Deserve
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Virtual healthcare platforms have the rare opportunity to revolutionize the system and offer truly patient-centric care. Virtual health should complement hands-on care and help medical practitioners extend patient interactions, not limit them.

The principle applies to communication through text, email, chatbots enabled by predictive algorithms, virtual avatars with varying levels of sophistication, or even life-sized androids (robots with humanlike appearance), when triaging, treating and directing a patient through the care continuum. Digital messaging can be interpreted many ways depending on the effectiveness of the communicators involved, communications tools being used, and an infinite number of environmental variables.

Wilkerson posits that the nomenclature used in technology tools has created ambiguity in industries like telemedicine, where algorithms are branded in manners that are uncomfortably human.

“Terms such as ‘sentient beings’ and ‘biological brainpower’ are self-revelatory as to the inference they draw. That is, terms of this nature replace the simple clarity of ‘people and persons’ and imply that the distinction between people and machines, for these purposes, is unclear,” he wrote in Of Two Minds. "Ambiguities of this nature are chilling. Arguably, the phrase 'AI' should be dispensed with, as it sets up a false equivalency between machines and people through the inevitable 'partner phrases' AI and human intelligence.”

Throughout the process of modernization and reorganization of Canadian healthcare services, an ongoing discussion should centre on a minimal level of involvement by human healthcare practitioners at key phases of every patient’s care journey, and codifying that “human touch” procedure. Automation can and should bring substantial efficiencies for Canadian businesses but crucial aspects of care management remain inevitably more efficient over time if carried out by real, experienced people capable of great empathy and professional judgment.

EQ Care will continue pushing the industry to move toward systematizing the human touch, across all patient services without compromise, because it is what Canadians under our care demand and deserve.


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