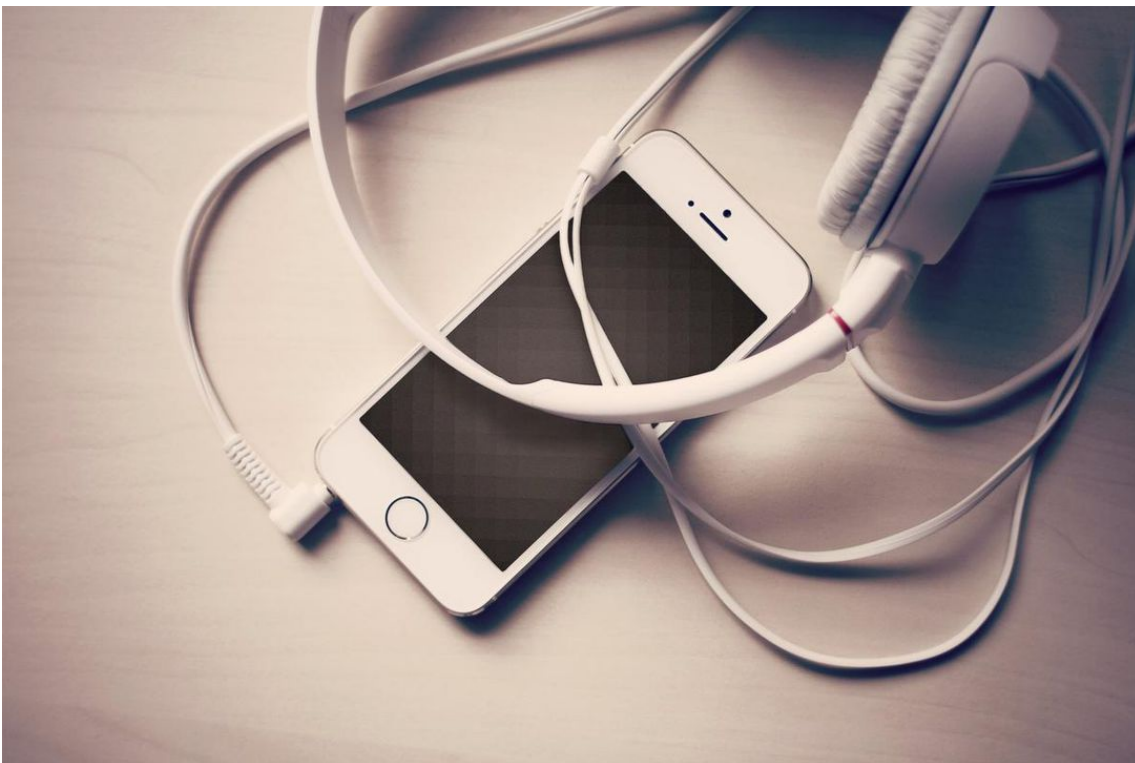


Smart use of smart phones can improve health care

By **Duncan Rozario** Contributor
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Follow the money, we are told, if you want to get to the root of an issue. In Ontario, we spend \$61.6 billion annually on health care, and yet according to the 2017 OECD ratings of 72 metrics of health care, we rank 9th out of 11 countries.

The health care of the future does not exist in the past. Yet we continue to do many of the same things and expect different outcomes. Spending more money only on more hospitals, and more physicians, and more pharmaceuticals, may not be the successful strategy.

Though there are more citizens with cellphones (30.1 million in 2018) in Canada than automobiles (25 million in 2018), we continue to adhere to an antiquated model where almost all patients must travel to, and attend their physician for everything from a prescription renewal to a discussion about insomnia.

In our hands, we carry with us a most amazing technology, the smartphone, that we use on a regular basis to communicate with family and friends, conduct business, such as banking, but not to obtain health care. A virtual visit saves on average 102 minutes versus an in-person medical visit and can resolve up to 92 per cent of medical issues.

Yet in Ontario last year, only 0.6 per cent of medical care occurred virtually. In contrast, Kaiser Permanente in the United States in 2016 completed 52 per cent of its 112 million patient visits virtually.

In developing countries, infrastructure has skipped fixed land lines for mobile and data communication, and has moved directly to wireless broadband. Our legacy health care infrastructure of the past is not sustainable in the future.

A thoughtful switch to virtual care is the type of existential pivot we need to make to successfully grow and widely deploy our health care system for the future. We need to bring accessible local health care to the citizens of our communities, where, how, and when they need it, instead of expecting them to seek us out.

Virtual care will be one of the key tools to advance accessibility to health care and reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues. In Oakville, we are running a pilot study with an app called Reacts and we have been able to successfully provide over 500 virtual visits over the last three months with patient experience scores of 9.5/10. Ask your physician if your next visit can be done virtually, and if not, ask why.

Information is power. We need access to, and control of our own health care information. When you go to your physician, ask for access to your medical chart, either through a patient portal, or via a copy of your consultation reports.

Improve your medical and digital literacy, understand your medical issues and how you can improve them. Google search words you don't understand, or better yet, ask your care provider to explain them. Understand both the risks and benefits associated with medical and surgical treatments, and ask your care provider if there is an alternative. Mental health, physical health, and social health all link in an integral fashion and we must support the integration of all three aspects.

Ask your elected representatives how access to virtual care and mental health care will be improving. Online portals to our health care information, pre-appointment questionnaires, apps to manage care pathways, and many more disruptive technologies are close at hand, and can help to connect the dots in health care.

When you follow the money, you will see that health care in Ontario involves paying for large buildings, more procedures, and drugs, and surgery — this route is without end. Perhaps a financial focus on prevention, healthy diet, improving access to physical fitness facilities, in-home supports and monitoring, and community mental health support will be a better place to put your tax dollars.

An integrated comprehensive care program as St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton has demonstrated the potential to reduce costs and improve patient outcomes and experiences. Patients and their families are a tremendously underutilized resource in health care.

While the surgeon may be the expert in surgery, you are the expert when it comes to how you feel and what you need. You want to be a part of your health care and to take control and remember, that it is all about you.

Our patients want to be a part of their health care teams, and as we organize their care around them, they will inevitably, and rightly, become the centre of what we do.

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<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2019/08/19/smart-use-of-smart-phones-can-improve-health-care.html>