Digital health in spotlight as pandemic shifts tech show focus

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Digital health care is in the spotlight at the tech industry's big event this week amid a pandemic that has highlighted the importance of remote services, with a potentially lasting impact on medical delivery.

The Consumer Electronics Show, which is being held online from Monday, will showcase technology for remote patient visits, biosensors and a range of other gadgetry that can help people avoid doctors' offices and waiting rooms.

Demand for telehealth services was projected to have risen 64 percent in the US alone, according to Frost & Sullivan researchers, underscoring the need for better communications platforms, home monitoring devices and more.

"We have learned that going into waiting rooms with other sick patients can be problematic and people are looking for other ways of getting care," said Samir Qamar, a family physician and founder of MedWand, which is expected to launch its device with 10 diagnostic tools for remote care this year.

Qamar, who is speaking at a CES panel, said the pandemic also exposed gaps in telemedicine including a lack of accessible internet for some population segments.

"One of the big problems is the lack of ability to examine patients remotely," Qamar told AFP.

Companies have been developing remote tools that can be used at home, including stethoscopes, otoscopes, heart and blood pressure monitors, but need to show they are highly accurate in order to gain regulatory approval, Qamar noted.

CES exhibitors will be showing devices that monitor the elderly living alone for signs of medical issues, wearables that help with early detection of disease as well as various diagnostic tools.

Also on display will be an array of workplace health gadgets, from smart thermometers to air purifiers and sanitizing robots.

"Crazy devices such as personal air purifiers that were viewed with amusement last year will be viewed as much more relevant this year," said Richard Windsor, an independent technology analyst who pens the Radio Free Mobile blog.

Digital records, analytics

Another important element for remote medical care is keeping track of health data and using analytics tools to better understand the risks for COVID-19 as well as other diseases, notes Bettina Experton, chief executive at the digital health platform Humetrix, a longtime CES exhibitor.

With more people turning to telemedicine, "sometimes the physician might not have an existing relationship with the patient, so there is a critical need for their medical history," Experton said.

"We have developed various mobile applications with [medical history](#) which you can share with the push of a button."

The platform, which is available for individuals and insurers, also uses artificial intelligence to help assess risks for people affected by the coronavirus.

Similarly, Tokyo-based Axion Research will be unveiling an early-detection system that predicts disease risks, including for cancer and Alzheimer's, using AI to "map" people's health outlook.

Fitness evolves

While CES has long focused on consumer products for fitness, this has increasingly been applied to the healthcare field as technology advances, said Robin Murdoch of the consulting group Accenture, who follows the show.

"It has been focused on the consumer side of [health](#) and fitness, but there is some crossover," Murdoch said.

"You now have smartwatches and other devices which monitor your pulse, your blood oxygen and more, and that provides a lot of data" that can be applied for medical purposes.

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