Caring for Seniors **in the Digital Age**

We're heading toward a precipice.

A statistic has gained prominence lately in both the media and the healthcare field, and it's going to have an immense impact on the entire country:

That statistic? 10,000 baby boomers retire **every day**.

There's been some debate as to the accuracy of this statement, which hails from the Pew Research Center, but the math continues to hold up when you really take a close look at it, which the Washington Post did a couple years ago.

10,000 baby boomers retiring every day means 10,000 more people who qualify for Medicare. It means 10,000 people who require regular and ongoing medical services. It means 10,000 people who need extensive care coordination for up to four decades.

Is your healthcare organization prepared for that kind of volume?

Care management is set to experience a massive transformation in the coming years as hospitals, health systems, post-acute providers, payers and other facilities all strive to meet the increased demands imposed by the sheer volume of retired persons they're expected to treat. Indeed, this transformation has already begun, with some of the foremost experts in healthcare implementing pilot projects and revolutionary treatment plans to provide top-level care for every patient, no matter how many patients that entails.

No matter if you're a case manager, an administrator, a member of the C-suite or any other member of a healthcare entity, you're going to be impacted by the changes coming to healthcare. In this Trend Report, we'll look at the myriad transformations taking place in the field of senior care, the technologies reshaping the conversation around care coordination, and the steps you and your facilities need to take in order to meet the demands of the retiring masses.

🔍 A Technological Focus

The baby boomers who retire tomorrow aren't going to be technological neophytes; you're talking about people who have been using cellphones, tablets and operating systems of all kinds for years. They may not be Snapchatting each other, but they are certainly more tech-savvy than what many senior care providers have come to expect from their constituents.

Everyone is going to need to step up their game when it comes to technology. Tech must be at the crux of the modern caregiving model. You need to design policies, processes and communications around technology and software so those who are accustomed to using digital devices as a primary means of interaction are satisfied with their care experience.

And perhaps more importantly? You want to ensure your employees are satisfied too. Remember that the modern caregiver uses their Smartphone as a skeleton key of sorts for everything they do in life. Your healthcare apps must tap into this interactivity in order to be successful and provide a seamless experience for users.

This is a tightrope to walk, admittedly, because at the same time, you can't alienate that portion of your population who is not quite that tech-savvy. You might be in charge of the care of someone who is 65 and well-versed in the latest apps while simultaneously caring for someone in their 90s who never once used a computer in the workplace.

Modern policies must take both populations into account and offers concessions to each. But even those patients averse to tech must recognize that providers can and must use connected devices to conduct their jobs with the necessary professionalism and dedication.

Family Becomes More Invested

Even if retiring baby boomers aren't all that invested in their devices, you can bet their families will be.

Case managers need to realize the importance of communicating with family members on the platforms they interact with daily. As millennial sons and daughters take charge of their baby boomer mothers and fathers, they're going to expect a level of coordination that is, to be quite frank, unprecedented.

It's not just that the adult children of baby boomers grew up in an age of digital devices that will leave them more invested in their parents' care. Financial and societal factors have also made the family unit more tight-knit in the past ten years than it has for quite some time.

According to financial planning website The Motley Fool, quoting a statistic from the National Endowment for Financial Education, a whopping 59% of Baby Boomers provide financial support to their adult children aged 18 to 39. In the wake of the 2008 financial crash and burdened with student debt and few jobs that could feasibly and quickly pay down that debt, millennial adults moved back home, borrowed money from their families and drew support in myriad other ways.

The unexpected consequence of this is that the familial bond between those two generations, the boomers and the millennials, became stronger than ever. The advent of instant communication through social media and digital devices,

coupled with the younger generation's increased reliance on some form of financial support, has brought the older adults and their adult children together in a way that's unprecedented.

The children of baby boomers thus expect connection in their mothers' and fathers' care plans as well. They expect these connections instantly, at regular intervals, using devices they interact with every day. And because they're going to be the ones who deal with the health concerns and finances of their parents as they age, it's incumbent upon hospitals to meet these persons where they are.

That means an increased emphasis on provider portals, places where the adult child can log in to see their parents' health progress from any device. It means apps that can tap into instant messaging software that allows the family member to fire off a quick inquiry about their parents. It means push notifications detailing upcoming appointments and alerts for when a parent's wearable device isn't meeting certain agreed-upon metrics between a doctor and a patient.

This connection, already important for the retiring senior, is even more important for the child who will oversee their care.

Insights at the Population Level

One of the most important pivots healthcare systems will need to make as senior populations place an ever-increasing strain on available resources is the move from individual-centric care to population-oriented care.

This doesn't mean that case managers, nurses and those other individuals who make regular contact with patients should just reduce their emphasis on holistic care or making a person-to-person connection. But it does mean the administrators designing and implementing policy need to establish qualifications for providing the best level of care for the largest population, with different plans in place for the multiple subsets of that population.

Big data is big in the modern healthcare realm, as it's the only way to arrive at a point where this kind of wide-ranging policy and process discussion is even possible.

Once again, tech holds the key for compiling the relevant insights and translating that information into actionable care plans. Applications must be deployed to cope with the vast amounts of data flowing in from electronic health records via secure channels. Informaticists will grow ever more in demand as hospital systems and senior care planning agencies require persons to parse this data to arrive at valid conclusions. And case managers and caretakers, the folks on the front lines of healthcare, will need to sift through the necessary patient insights to gain an accurate representation of their patients' overall status.

We are going to have a nearly endless array of data on the aging population. And it's what we do with that data that becomes of paramount importance. The insights we attain will trickle down the care path for decades to come.

Medication Management

One area of immense improvement in the future will be that of medication management, particularly for seniors who don't live in assisted living facilities.

A chief concern among many physicians and care team members everywhere is that they immediately lose sight of their patients when they leave the confines of the hospital or clinic. Regular check-ins by a case manager certainly help alleviate worries, but much of the adherence to a medication regimen remains up to the discretion of the patient. What might seem straightforward during a discussion with a provider is anything but when prescriptions are being filled at different times, each with different directions, and the plan grows ever more complex.

Apps and wearable devices hold the key. Think of these as a digital pill box. Apps already exist that allow you to schedule medication reminders, input necessary vital data and more. When a provider has a username for these same apps, he or she can receive a precise record of the patient taking their

medications at the prescribed times. If, for any reason, a schedule is missed, a case manager can be alerted at once. They monitor the patient's vitals and check in to make sure everything is proceeding apace.

In this way, the risk of preventable errors, such as an overdose or under-dose of medication, can be reduced dramatically.

Care Team Coordination

Seniors already receive care from a variety of specialists: the case manager who checks in regularly on their ongoing health, the home health aide who consults with them in-person, the cardiologist they visit with regularly, etc. The big shift for the digital age is in how each of these members of the care team will interact with one another.

Technology stands ready to bring these disparate parties together under one roof. Imagine the members of the care team as spokes on a bicycle wheel, radiating outward from the center, the patient:

In the above example, they're all connected directly to the patient, but not to each other. In the new, progressive care model, they'll also be able to communicate with one another, similar to how the rim of the bike wheel connects the spokes on a bicycle:

All persons who have been granted access to that patient's medical data will be able to monitor their care accordingly, thus eliminating the bureaucracy that can negatively impact healthcare. Previously, the patient's ear, nose and throat doctor may not have had reason to communicate with their physical therapist other than a few scribbled notes on a piece of paper. But now, instant messaging apps and advanced EHR communication hubs can unite all of these persons toward the common goal of aiding the patient's health.

This coordination of care will progress dramatically in the coming years.

Non-Medical Resources

Caring for seniors in the digital age will require something that may seem completely incongruous: setting seniors up with resources that have nothing to do with care.

You want to ensure the wellbeing of a retirement community? Buy every person there a Nintendo Switch. Coordinate with Lyft to get regular rides to and from wherever they need to go. Work with Whole Foods and other food providers on discounted groceries and getting healthy meals on-site on a regular basis.

Want to learn more about how to invest in programs targeting the social determinants of health at your facility?

View Ensocare's Executive Summary "How Software Helps Hospitals Address the Social Determinants of Health" at www.ensocare.com/how-software-helps-hospitals-address-the-social-determinants-of-health

The social determinants of health are the most important part of an individual's wellbeing, and their impact only grows the older a patient becomes. If you can solidify these aspects of your patients' lives, you can extend their lifespan, reduce their overall reliance on the healthcare system, and save on costs for both you and them.

Cost Control Measures

Because forward-thinking healthcare organizations will need to put forth a substantial investment in technology and advanced care management models, it's critical to uncover means of cost control without negatively impacting the patient experience or the overall care of the patient.

The technology and software your facility invests in will ultimately be what creates substantial cost savings. Streamlined apps, ones that integrate seamlessly with multiple EHR systems, can reduce labor hours and move patients to new care categories more efficiently than was previously possible. And you have the opportunity to reduce costly staff turnover because you're giving persons within your workforce access to the technology they find most useful.

Numerous other cost control measures will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case, hospital-by-hospital basis. As hospitals and post-acute providers alike move toward a volume-based prevention model that seeks to keep seniors from consistently graduating to ever-more intensive levels of care, you'll realize cost savings by keeping the majority of your patient population at the top of the funnel, so to speak (see below). By using technology to maintain a certain level of wellbeing, that portion of the funnel widens, and you'll be able to better manage patient volume across your organization because you're preventing episodes that cause persons to need to seek the more expensive levels of care at the bottom of the funnel.
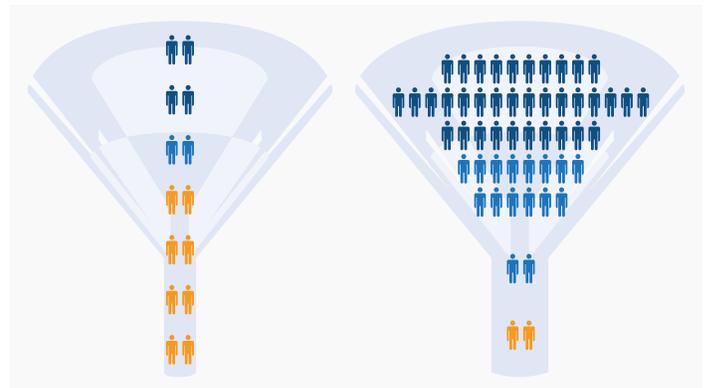
Longer Lives

Finally, you must also take extended patient lives into consideration in your care management planning.

Persons today who retire at the age of 62 or 65 could conceivably have 30 to 40 years left in their lives, and the number of healthcare touch points each person requires only increases during that period of time.

Your approach to care in the digital age will need to go beyond life expectancy. You must account for the strained resources that numerous patients are set to encounter.

Remember earlier when we discussed the financial support baby boomers have given to their adult children? That, coupled with inflation, is taking a toll on the population. Simply put: Too many baby boomers are under-planning for their golden years. The AARP, quoting a Fidelity Investments report, notes that **48% of the baby boomer population is not financially prepared for retirement**.

That's going to hit facilities hard. Medicare will help, but using current care models, it's not going to help at the levels that providers need. In order to maintain continuous care for persons who may or may not have the resources to pay providers at the rates those providers have grown accustomed to over the years, some tough decisions need to be made. In many cases, it requires a complete re-evaluation of care planning, which ties right back to the need for investment in tech and software solutions that can streamline the care process more effectively.

The Digital Age Beckons

The times are changing. Boomers are retiring at astounding rates, creating demand for healthcare services like never before. But at the same time, providers and patients alike are facing a strain on resources. The next few years will be a trying time as facilities adjust to the new reality of the situation.

By understanding precisely what's to come, based on what we've emphasized in this Trend Report, you should have a better idea of the steps you need to take to become a reliable senior care provider in the digital age.

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