Healthcare 2021: Five Major Trends

As might be expected, the focus of research and technological developments has shifted to tackling the lingering COVID-19 crisis. This includes trialling new vaccines to help prevent the coronavirus spread, developing simple apps for early detection of infection, and building 'smart cities' to better respond to future outbreaks.

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Breakthroughs arising from the accelerated pace of innovation this year means people will be better equipped in facing new challenges under 'the new normal', according to best-selling author Bernard Marr, who also serves as strategic business & technology advisor to governments and companies.

Against this backdrop of tech-driven COVID-19 mitigation campaign, Marr shares his prediction of the top five healthcare trends for 2021.

1. Healthcare a consideration in every aspect of life

Next year, safeguarding the health of employees and customers will be the primordial concern of every company. As such, biosecurity measures (e.g. sanitation stations, screening devices) and onsite quarantine protocols for staff who can't work from home will be in place. Such tech innovations will lead to overall improvement in safety measures that can reduce risks of contagious illnesses being passed around. Meanwhile, it is important to support the mental health of remote workers as they juggle home and work duties. Technology will help in mitigating these dangers; for example, health apps that monitor a person's activity and alerts them to take breaks and exercise.

2. Virtual care and remote medicine

Some telemedicine programmes now include virtual hospitals that combine remote monitoring and in-person services for patients. Due to the pandemic, virtual visits have skyrocketed (reducing the risk of the infection spread), and in 2021 it is expected that one-third of virtual care appointments will be related to mental health issues. Interestingly, in the UK, companion robots are being introduced into care homes – these robots were found to be helpful in reducing symptoms of loneliness and social isolation.

3. Genomics and gene editing lead to further breakthroughs

Breakthroughs in this field will accelerate progress in precision or personalised medicine, where drugs or therapies can be customised to match a patient's genetic profile, making them more effective. The technology has also been used to create a 'lab on a chip' that is used for rapid detection of coronavirus infection. A handheld device capable of detecting if people are infected, without having to rely on inaccurate indicators such as coughing or a temperature, could be hugely beneficial in returning a level of normality to our lives.

4. Data and AI drives shift to fairer healthcare insurance and coverage

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that people are willing to share personal data when the benefits to overall public health are clearly communicated – e.g. use of tracing apps or track-and-trace systems. Personal data are also collected through wearable technology and online activities, such that providers have an increasingly accurate picture of where and when intervention may be needed. Insurance providers will also rely on using advanced predictive technology to better understand risk and more accurately set premiums.

5. AI, IoT, and Smart Cities improve our ability to detect and respond to future outbreaks

'Smart cities' use digital connectivity and automated data-driven decision process to improve urban living – e.g. better public transport networks and garbage collection. With the COVID-19 contagion, smart city initiatives focus on managing the way growing numbers of people will live in ever-closer proximity to each other. Environmental health is also a major focus, with tech-driven innovation aimed at reducing air pollution and building resilience to climate-driven change such as temperature and sea-level rises, which experts say are the reasons behind more frequent and violent storms.

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