

Focused, proactive, involved healthcare

Healthcare is a subject that's close to everyone's heart, and both the healthcare sector and consumers alike are always alert to new developments and trends. In recent years, these have included a greater focus on the impact of non-communicable diseases, as well as a clear indication that patients across the board want to be more involved in their treatment.



By [Shelley Harris](#) 17 Jan 2012



With this in mind, what are some of the trends we can expect to see in the healthcare sector in 2012?

1. Find it; treat it

The burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is often underestimated, particularly in Africa, where the impact of communicable diseases like malaria and HIV/Aids is such an urgent problem. The fact of the matter is that NCDs, which are usually chronic, are far more prevalent than we imagine. For example, 366 million people worldwide are currently living with diabetes, one of the more common NCDs, and this figure is set to climb to 552 million by 2030. A startling one billion people are either affected by the disease or are living with someone who is.

Early identification and managed care for people living with NCDs is therefore becoming a key area of focus in healthcare, and has the two-pronged objective of reducing healthcare costs and minimising individual suffering. If NCDs like diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease and chronic lung disease are identified early and actively managed, sufferers have a far greater chance of leading normal lives than if the disease remains unidentified until it enters an acute phase.

2. Be aware or be square

The most important healthcare message is therefore becoming 'be aware or be square', and both government and private healthcare providers are using various communications channels to get this message across. The objective is to encourage the public to become more informed about healthcare, more proactive about identifying potential problems early on, and more committed to adhering to disease management protocols.

One of the ways in which this is being done is by integrating healthcare messaging into social and community activities. Sponsored events, roadshows and free concerts are all being used to get specific messages across, and to provide opportunities for testing and consultation.

3. Expect normal

Another important message that healthcare providers are trying to get across is that if NCDs are identified early,

patients can expect to lead to normal lives. A diagnosis no longer means a life of protracted ill-health, but the earlier the disease is diagnosed, the better.

The same principle applies in the case of communicable diseases, of course, but in that case the communications emphasis is on immunisation, prevention, minimising person-to-person infection, and the influence of environmental factors like contaminated water.

4. The 'Fab Factor'

It's difficult for people to envisage how illness can or will impact on their lives, and this is where the personal testimony of those living with a particular disease is so valuable. The 'fab factor' of using celebrity testimony will therefore become more common in healthcare messaging and marketing, and this will be used to prompt word-of-mouth interaction as well.

Young people in particular often feel that being diagnosed with an illness will result in them being excluded from their peer group or from the social scene. So if admired celebrities tell positive stories about living with a chronic disease, resistance to testing and treatment may be overcome.

5. Tell me, doctor

As more information about various diseases becomes available, patients want to become more involved in their treatment. This means that healthcare providers will need to inform patients about their illnesses and discuss treatment options with them thoroughly, rather than just diagnosing and prescribing.

Especially amongst medical aid patients, healthcare is seen as a paid-for service. They therefore expect to be informed about their illnesses and treatment options every step of the way. The 'take two aspirin and call me in the morning' approach just doesn't cut it anymore.

6. A joint operation

More and more, we will see government and private healthcare providers cooperating to address healthcare challenges. Neither sector is able to provide a total healthcare service, so cooperation is recognised as being essential in order to manage public health.

7. Taking healthcare to the people

In line with this, there will be greater emphasis on taking healthcare to the people in the future. Both government and private healthcare providers will be using mobile testing and treatment clinics to get healthcare services to people living in even the remotest areas.

This methodology has the advantage of minimising costs, maximising resources, and of being an immediate and flexible response to healthcare needs in areas where there are few permanent facilities. We may even see the mobile clinic becoming a more common feature in urban areas too, where it will be used as a means of maximising primary healthcare resources.

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