**MedTech Chat Podcast**

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**Respondent: Jan Oldenburg**

**Welcome to Medtech Chat where we discover the latest healthcare tools, device technology, as well as research approaches. We'll be talking to designers, insight professionals, and other executives to better understand how MedTech is helping patients and those caring for them now and in the future.**

**So today I'm very excited to be talking to Jan Oldenburg again. She is the principal of Participatory Health Consulting. She advises and mentors startups and healthcare organizations regarding the evolving digital health landscape. Jan has focused on digital transformation in healthcare for 20 years. She's consulted with organizations of all sizes and in all areas of healthcare. She's also held leadership roles at Health Partners, Kaiser Permanente, and Aetna. She's the principal editor of both Participatory Healthcare: A Person-Centered Approach to Transforming Healthcare published in 2016, and Engage: Transforming Healthcare Through Digital Patient Engagement published in 2013. She's also the author of Patient Engagement chapters in the third and fourth editions of Medical Informatics, an executive primer. She's a former co-chair of the HIMSS Connected Health Committee and former board member of the Society for Participatory Medicine. She co-chairs the HL7 Patient Contributed Data workteam. Jan tweets @janoldenburg. Thanks again for joining me today, Jan.**

I'm so happy to be here with you, Tom.

**Of course, I always enjoy talking with you as we talk about the digital healthcare collaborative in the various meetings. One thing that came up recently that I wanted to chat with you today about is digital front door. Can you explain what that is and why it's important?**

The digital front door is a little bit what you make of it. There are a lot of different definitions out there for digital front door and almost every organization is claiming right now to have a digital front door. That's true whether you're a healthcare provider, whether you are a payer or whether you're a vendor. But let me describe the way I think about the digital front door and then we can talk about some of the different categories of capabilities that you'll see out in the market as you encounter people who are claiming to have a digital front door solution. That sound reasonable?

**Yeah, that's great. Thank you.**

I think the digital front door is best thought of as a way of providing some integration and convenience for consumers and patients who are looking for how to get services from a healthcare organization. They may come in trying to understand, do I need to come in, in person? Is this a phone call? Is it a telehealth visit? What comes next? What kinds of services do I need? Once I have a relationship, what are some of the kinds of capabilities that you can provide me on an ongoing basis that are in person and what things are digital? Let's start with the function of triage. When someone is looking for care and it maybe they've got an existing relationship with a provider organization or they may be actually thinking about, "Who do I need to go to for care?" If you're a provider organization, you want to make sure that you look like the best option for that person. That perhaps starts with helping the person triage. "What kind of care do I need?" That involves things like checking your symptoms and making recommendations so that you know where to call. It may also involve helping you get the first available appointment. Now, there are folks who have been in that triage business and symptom checking business for a long time. What I think we're seeing in the digital front door environment is that they're integrating those services for providers and for individuals with how to find care. There have also been organizations that have been focused for a while on helping people get the first available appointments. They also have a corresponding impact on the provider organizations that work with them, helping them fill empty appointments slacks in a day. But what we're seeing increasingly is those kinds of capabilities integrated into get somebody the best care at the organization they choose in the speediest way. So one of the factors about this triage function is helping you figure out what kind of visit makes sense. It may be that a telehealth visit is the simplest thing and then they can help you get to an integrated telehealth capability, or it may be that it's something that requires a little bit deeper of an exploration either with a primary care doc or a specialist in which case you've got some follow on capabilities. This is not just through initial visit. These are capabilities that also help individuals who are dealing with either a recurring problem or a chronic disease in helping them make the right decision about who they need to see and how often they need to see them. Then I would call the next kind of components of digital front door what I'll talk about as relationship management and marketing. So we're all used to the thinking about CRM and consumer relationship management and really that's associated primarily with marketing function. There's a very real place for marketing in the digital front door environment and thinking about how you get the attention of consumers. When I talk about it in the context of the digital front door, I think we can go a little bit deeper and we can think about the way that organizations in the marketing space are using all of the knowledge they have about you whether it's from your demographic profile, to what they can glean from the digital dust you leave in your journeys on the internet to the kinds of things that you're willing to actually tell them. They use those things to market more effectively to you. Now in the healthcare space, we have the opportunity to personalize by going a little bit deeper on these kinds of things. In the healthcare space, once I'm a patient behind the HIPAA umbrella you know things not just about all of those external marketing factors but you also know things about my actual condition. You can combine the power of that external relationship management with the power of what you know about me as a patient to personalize the interactions. I give the example sometimes. I have a dog. If you're my healthcare provider, you probably don't know that from any of the forms that I filled out. But if you're looking at the things that I purchase on my social media content, you probably know that I have a dog. In point of fact, if you want to get me to exercise more, you're probably better served by giving me a nudge about whether or not my dog is getting enough exercise even more than if you nudge me about whether I'm getting enough exercise. Those are the kinds of combined pieces of information that can really allow us to harness the real power of this relationship management segment. There's all also some very basic things going on in this segment that involves making sure I'm reminded about my visit in the technology of my choice, whether that's text or a phone call or an email message, or all three, making sure that I know about follows. Again, through some of those same channels, especially paying attention to both, which I say are my preferred channels and which ones I actually respond to. Then thinking about what are the ways that you keep me connected to you as an organization throughout the month and year and the space between the visits, whether that's in part by informing me about seminars that you're offering either in person or virtually, getting me involved in the community of peer support patients who are like me and can help me think through how to manage my disease or whether it is providing me with tools or capabilities that allow me to track either my health or my care along the way. If it matters, report it to my doctor as well for collaboration. The last piece I think I'll talk about in this broad segment of digital front doors is the ones that are doing some of the integration functions. They're taking those symptom checkings and appointment making function along with the communication and personalization capabilities along with scheduling you into the right kind of a visit at the earliest possible time. Those companies are the ones that I think are the emerging powerhouses in this space, because they're really thinking about this not as only a digital set of capabilities or only an in-person set of capabilities, but something that really helps consumers bridge that gap and figure out the right kind of care at the right time. They're also thinking through, well, how do we do payment if it's virtual? How do we address some of the things to make your visit most efficient so that even if you're coming in for an in-person visit, can we give you your forms online first so that we've got those all taken care of and virtually? Can we get your payment taken care of online first and help you understand what this visit might cost you, etc? When you're thinking about the capabilities from that standpoint, you can also start to do things in a healthcare system that really benefit the people who are using the most efficient needs. If someone has used your digital tools to schedule their visit and to complete the forms, perhaps you can give them priority when they come in the door and make sure that they're being seen effectively and quickly and have less waiting time because they've done that extra work upfront. If you tell them that it helps reinforce the behaviors that you really want to encourage because it's more efficient for them, more convenient for them and more efficient for you as well. I'll also note that when we think about these capabilities, the payer side is thinking about how to approach digital front door as well, how to make the initial interactions that their members are having with them efficient and effective, how to help them get to the information they need or the care they need in the most efficient fashion and how to also combine all of that with this layer of personalization so that for the individual, it really feels as if the tools are operating and supplying some of the things that they might have in the past gotten from guidance from an individual. That's the overview. Let's start with that and figure out where else we'd like to go, Tom.

**That's very interesting. So digital front door is a hot topic as you've said and you've gone through these three aspects, the triage and scheduling, which is more from the provider point of view, this relationship management and marketing where you know information about the customer, if you will, and can tailor things and then this integrated digital front door which bridges some of these things as well as making sure that in person and digital also come together. What I'm curious about is as you kind of touched on there towards the end, what are the opportunities for personalization across the whole journey and reinforcing people's personal choices?**

I think there are many of them. It's one of the spaces that healthcare has been fairly behind the times and really understanding how to apply them and how to support individuals. So we actually have tended to treat all diabetics as if they have the same values, the same goals, the same motivations for all people who are at the transition from their work lives into Medicare and retirement as if they've got the same goals and values. Just take that at any point in any kind of disease state and we have been much better at what I'd say is caring for the population in dealing with the averages and the usual and customary individual with the usual and customary motivations rather than really thinking about how we can personalize that. When you think as well about the number of tools people are using in the daily lives going beyond using a portal to potentially tracking their exercise with some sort of a step counter tracking where they run with some sort of the tool, tracking what they eat and when they eat and at it both for health and also for weight management. We're gathering across that spectrum a lot of information about individuals and we're using hardly any of it. We're not giving much of it back. We're not providing people with insights that will help them make the behavior changes that they have as a goal. We're not providing them with personalized suggestions that help them maximize perhaps their insurance coverage, perhaps the care that they have accessible to them and perhaps their own own goals and desires. So I think what we can start thinking about as we really explore this arena of an integrated digital front door and integrated services offering to patients, we can start really exploring what it also means in terms of personalizing the information not just on the practical elements of knowing that I generally like to schedule provider visits in the late afternoon or the early morning or that I am an asthmatic and so I need a visit both in the spring and the fall when my allergies kick in. But it's also about thinking about, "Jan, you told us the last time that you were interested in losing some weight and we see that you come in for visits much more frequently when you weigh more than X pounds, your asthma seems to be worse. Is there a way we can collaborate to help you manage your weight in ways that may also have an impact on how many asthma medications you need to pay?" Now that's some powerful analytics and that's some powerful insight that might help me and give me an additional incentive for addressing the health concern that I have been dealing with. Those are the kinds of things that I think that promises there with all of the data that we're collecting with the opportunity for machine learning and AI. We really can start thinking about offering people who want it and next layer experience of personalization and support using their digital tools and helping them collaborate better with their doctors.

**That's definitely a very exciting vision. I'm curious as you're talking and I'm thinking about normally a front door, I go to my physician, I walk through, they collect information, etc. Here I've been thinking with digital front door that's captured perhaps electronically beforehand, maybe I come in and they realize I'm there and that triggers things. But it sounds like as we're talking further and further, it's the journey and it's a back and forth. It's not just them taking information from me, but them having a conversation with me about my health. I'm curious when we think about digital front door, how far does that extend down the journey or is that a shorthand to be thinking more about digital in general?**

I think the best companies in the digital front door space and I'm including both the vendors that are serving them and the providers and payers that are implementing them are really thinking about this as a way of partnering with patients across their entire healthcare journey. The front door is what gets you in but then it's really a set of tools to make sure you keep walking down the right path, if you will, that you keep selecting at each stage, making the choices that are right for you. I think one of the keys to this is thinking about your entire operation if you're a healthcare entity from the standpoint of the individual and thinking about how you can reduce friction at each point along the way. We know that whether it's thinking about how to get paid or get your services paid for, or whether it's thinking about where you need to go or what you need to do in the healthcare journey, that it is not seamless for people today. It is not smooth. Frustration is probably more of the experience people have especially if they've got a complex condition or multiple conditions rather than the sense that, "Oh, this is easy. This is smooth. This works well for me." I think of digital front door as a way of restructuring how we think about processes in our organizations and beyond our organizations, not just from a standpoint of what's the most convenient workflow that we can implement for the people who work in the organization but instead turning it on its head and asking what's the most convenient flow for individual? How many things can we help them do outside of our office rather than in our office? How can we bridge the gap between services that we offer and maybe that we're referring them out to? How can we help them have a better experience of getting their services paid for? Because once you start really flipping that dynamic and thinking about this as consumer convenience first, you really start seeing opportunities open up for ways that you can use technology to bridge those gaps and to walk beside somebody on their journey as an aid, as a support, as a counselor.

**It's interesting, as you're talking, I'm thinking about all the different stakeholders and companies. You have providers, you have hospital systems, you have health insurance and payers, you have solution providers. I'm trying to figure out where is this- Who's going to bring it all together? How are we going to have this vision that you're proposing? Is it going to have to have all the stakeholders come together or are there going to be vendors that provide the solution that help the providers and the payers come together in some way?**

I think you will see a mix of things as this shakes out. Now we've already seen in the marketplace that in part to address some of these things in part to address cost issues, insurers are buying up providers as a way of providing seamless care or acquiring telehealth capabilities and integrating them into their services. I think you talked about that last week with Mike. You're also seeing providers who, especially as we enter the realm of value-based care are thinking more and more about how can we help people manage that money? How can we take on risks so that we can do the right thing for people without worrying as much about somebody looking over our shoulders to evaluate the nuances of how we're providing that care? I do think everybody seeking in part an answer to this, where does integration happen solution? In the meantime, I do think you'll see a variety of vendors stepping in to fill niches in that. The best of them are thinking about how can we provide a solution in its entirety that crosses those boundaries and that allows people to buy one and have all of the integration points handled on their behalf. But I don't know that I'd place a bet today on exactly where this is going to happen whenever it is that we reach Healthcare Nirvana but I would say that innovative companies, whether they're on the payer side or on the provider side are looking at the situation and thinking about how can we provide the most comprehensive and effective and efficient set of services that focus on patients and patient convenience. Because increasingly, and I've waited a long time for this to happen, but we're finally seeing surveys that say that people have switched providers for a better digit experience, have switched providers because they're frustrated with not being able to get the care integration that they want, are pushing their providers to offer them options that help them manage their care digitally. As we start really seeing people crossing that barrier to apply consumer pressure onto providers and health systems and payers, that's going to expedite the speed of innovation. Frankly, in that respect, the pandemic has probably accelerated this both because organizations had to do some of this in order to just survive over the last year and a half, but also because consumers having tasted the fact that healthcare doesn't have to be as difficult as it's been in the past are not willing to go back to fully in person unintegrated services.

**This is great. I can't wait to join you in the digital Healthcare Nirvana of the future. I hope you get there soon. Are there any final comments that people should think?**

I hope get there and- Yeah, I think there's just one. I've talked a lot about digital capabilities today and there certainly are a number of things that can make this space better for individuals, more personalized, more individualized, more supportive. But I also hope that as we move forward with these things, we are also looking at ways that we can take some of the administrivia out of healthcare on both sides for providers and for patients, so that we've got additional time to support the relationship between patients and providers because in addition to convenience, it's also the relationship that heals that matters. If people have to choose convenience versus relationship, they're probably today going to choose convenience but they really want them both. Organizations that figure out how to support both of those human needs are going to be the ones that win in the marketplace.

**Well, thank you for explaining the digital front door, all of the complex aspects and where we may be headed for in the future. I appreciate it.**

My pleasure, Tom.

**Thanks for joining us. Please check out medtechchat.com for more podcasts and blogs. See you there.**