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Engagement: A Health Care Buzzword

Ben Fischer

Americans are so bad at taking care of themselves that finding ways to change their habits is booming business.

“Engagement” is the latest buzzword to hit health care as investment and attention flow toward companies and entrepreneurs who can help make consumers more engaged in the quest for better health and lower medical expenses.

Costs go down — for both consumers of and providers of health care — only if individuals follow doctors’ orders, stay on their prescriptions or get in shape. That’s why employers and health care providers are eager for help in figuring out ways to get people more involved in their health care decisions.

One company offering its assistance is Cor, a tech startup based in the District’s 1776 incubator. Founder and CEO [Nicholas Tolson](#) targets employers with underused workplace wellness programs. After introducing a new product in January, Cor has numerous clients with more than 1,000 employees each and is adding staff.

Cor’s software enables companies to set up competition-style programs in which groups of employees compete with each other in weight-loss contests, walking contests or other programs. Client companies can reward the winners and leverage the competitive spirit to drill home a health message to individual employees who know they have a problem but just aren’t self-starters.

“They wouldn’t subscribe to Self magazine, or go out to get a personal trainer, but if their employer presents something that’s simple, easy and fun, that’s going to lower the barrier to entry,” Tolson said.

Workplace wellness programs are tough enough, but hospitals and doctors are even more pressed to find ways to connect at an individual level.

“It’s incredibly hard,” said Michael Burcham, CEO of The Entrepreneur Center, a health care incubator in Nashville, Tenn. “Most people know that certain behaviors lead to diabetes if you’re not born with it: What you eat and lack of exercise. Yet we have a growing diabetic population.”

The health care industry is hoping to learn from other industries and companies that have successfully connected to individuals, Burcham said, mentioning Amazon.com Inc. Starbucks Corp., Netflix Inc. and others.

Some baby steps are underway already at health systems in the Washington area. Inova Health System’s doctors and urgent care centers use iTriage, an app from a Denver company that directs people to the closest facility, depending on their symptoms and severity of their problem.

CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield hires nurses from Healthways Inc. to stay in constant contact with patients in its Primary Care Medical Home program, and Novant Health contracts with Massachusetts-based TPR Media LLC to send pregnant women advice on pregnancy, delivering and parents.

In January, Bethesda-based GetWellNetwork Inc., which pioneered technology to better connect patients to their care details while in the hospital, was acquired by a private-equity firm.

“The struggle to get patients to take care of themselves won’t end — a certain number of employees and patients might be unreachable. But believers are sure there is a much larger group of people who can be reached and persuaded to change,” Burcham said.