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From Toys for the Rich and Powerful, to mHealth Solutions, Cell Phones Have Come a Long Way

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After the first cell phone was made available for consumption in 1973 by Motorola, very few of us had any idea how fast the technology would develop, or how quickly it would become so affordable that by 2012, 87% of the world's population (6 billion) would have a mobile phone subscription[1].

After all, the first cell phone was more than a foot long, nearly 2 pounds, and cost $3,995, which today would be the equivalent of $19,300[2]. In the 1987 film "Wall Street", the phone was used as a prop to illustrate the wealth and power of the antagonist character "Gordon Gekko", who in the film was a symbol of the greed and materialism that characterized the 1980s. It's no wonder that laughter filled the theater in the opening scene of the sequel released in 2010, when a guard hands Gordon his big outdated phone with his belongings as he is released from prison. It's as if the scene was included just to impress upon us how far we've come in 25 years.

In 1987, mobile phones were toys for the Gordon Gekkos of the world – not ordinary folks like us. We never imagined that one day the world would be filled with people walking around talking on cell phones small enough to fit into their pocket. In the U.S., 234 million people (out of 300 million) have mobile phones[3] and send roughly 7 billion messages via their phones each month[4].

Mobile phones are fast becoming the number one way that people access the web. Many are using apps to help them connect with financial accounts, social networking groups, online shopping sites, entertainment activities, and more recently, their online health activities.

Mobile health applications, estimated to grow to a $400 million market by 2016[5], are an innovative way to engage a broader population of people who need health services – people with chronic conditions

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like diabetes and heart disease, or those enrolled in lifestyle management programs for such things as weight management, nutrition and smoking cessation.

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation report, the populations that rely most heavily on mobile phones to access the Internet are also more likely to be uninsured[6]. As a result, mobile phones are increasingly used to reach people who cannot afford computers or broadband connections, live in rural areas far away from doctors and hospitals, and who typically lack access to healthcare resources.

As Medicare Advantage health plans accept millions of new members in 2014, they will be expected to provide "consumer friendly" engagement strategies. Mobile health solutions may prove valuable in improving care and managing costs.

By broadening reach to millions with limited access to care and serving up information and resources for those on the go, the technology may be the breakthrough we need to increase patient engagement and accountability.

[1]Digitalbuzz.com, Infographic: 2012 Mobile Growth Statistics, July 2, 2012
[2]Digitalbuzz.com, The Growth of Mobile: Stats & Figures that will Shock You, Nov. 21, 2010
[3]comscore.com, April 2011
[4]Harvard Business Review, How New Mobile Technologies Are Shaping a New Generation, April 8, 2012
[5]Forbes, 5 Ways Mobile Apps Will Transform Healthcare, June 4, 2012
[6]The Kaiser Family Foundation, Mobile Technology: Smart Tools to Increase Participation in Health Coverage, March 2011



About the Author

Mike Cotton became CEO of Alere Health in January 2012. Previously, he joined Alere in September 2010 as president of Alere's Health Improvement Division. With more than 22 years of managed care and healthcare consulting experience, Mr. Cotton came to Alere from WellCare Health Plans, Inc., where he served as President of National Health Plans, overseeing the company's health plan markets, operations, national provider contracting and business development.

Prior to WellCare, Mr. Cotton served as a worldwide partner and market leader for Mercer Human Resources Consulting from October 2001 to December 2005. Before Mercer, he held the positions of president and chief executive officer of Mid-Valley CareNet, a physician hospital organization (PHO) with more than 600 physician members.

Mr. Cotton earned his undergraduate degree from Franklin University and his master's degree in business administration from Cleveland State University.

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