

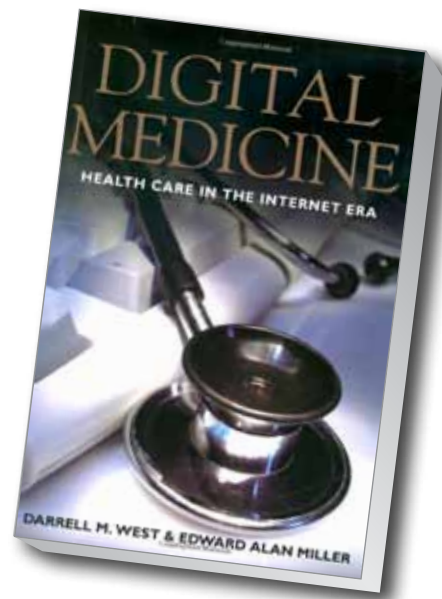
Digital Medicine

*Digital Medicine:
Health Care in the Internet Era*

By Darrell M. West and Edward Alan Miller

Brookings Institution Press 2009 • 183 pages

REVIEWED BY ROBERT EHRLICH



One of the mysteries of our technology revolution is why medicine is so far behind other industries in adopting communication technologies to improve delivery and administration of services. In the mid-1990s, WebMD tried to revolutionize how medicine is practiced by wiring doctors' offices to do e-medicine. Despite initial enthusiasm, few doctors signed up for WebMD services. Today we know WebMD as a successful consumer information portal. The failure to get doctors to change their ways plagues us today. Few doctors use computers to keep track of our records, order and track our prescriptions, set up appointments and provide us our test results. I imagine most of us use the old-fashioned telephone to get an appointment, ask questions, or wait for a call-back on our test results. Medical records are still handwritten and kept in a paper file.

"*Digital Medicine*" is a report from The Brookings Institution that answers many of the questions about why we, as a country, are so far behind in adopting digital medicine. (Note: Co-author Darrell West will be speaking at the DTC National Conference, April 7-9, in Washington, D.C.) This book is dense in terms of charts, data and interesting facts. It is not a James Patterson beach read. Each page takes some work to get through, but if you want to sound smarter than your peers then read it.

The basic issue, say the authors, is that change takes investment and ongoing training to digitize our system. Physicians have to make a fairly large investment in computerization and training office staff. They do not get reimbursed for e-mail consultations. There is no one system for digitizing medical records. Paper prescriptions work just fine for most doctors. The authors conclude that government needs to subsidize much of the costs or else physicians will not make it a priority to change.

Consumers, according to the report are active users in going to the Internet for information. There is wide use across all age categories and ethnic groups. The biggest users

are more highly educated consumers. The authors do point out that with so many commercial sites it is hard for consumers to get uniform quality information.

"*Digital Medicine*" points to countries where physician use is much more advanced. They cite several examples in Europe where government has encouraged digitization of records, prescriptions and appointments. New Zealand also happens to be very advanced in the adoption of digital medicine.

One would think that a genuine national health system would be the fastest way to increase the speed of digital medicine. Clearly we are a long way from achieving a unified system and the current health reform proposals do not go very far towards digital medicine. The authors point out that we, as a country, will eventually be forced to digitize because of cost. Digital medicine will lower costs, say the authors, and the benefits far outweigh the investment. In other words, a cost crisis will lead to full use of digital medicine.

"*Digital Medicine*" answers a lot of questions as to why we are so slow to join the digital revolution and what it might take to accelerate the adoption. It will be a long and tedious process to get there but one day we will. For companies trying to make money getting our system to change from paper to digital, it has been a frustrating ride. In many cases bankruptcy has been the outcome. Many of those companies were a decade or two too early in their vision.

Robert Ehrlich, chairman and chief executive of DTC Perspectives Inc., regularly reviews books about the pharmaceutical industry, marketing and advertising for DTC Perspectives magazine. He also writes a weekly e-newsletter providing insights on pharmaceutical marketing trends. To subscribe to this free weekly analysis, sign up at the Web site, www.DTCPerspectives.com. Ehrlich can be reached by e-mail at Bob@DTCPerspectives.com.