

Digital health technology offers new hope for better health outcomes

Symposium examines possibilities and best practices for innovative health tech

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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Deborah Estrin was less than a minute into her presentation when she posed the question.

“How do we best leverage data from all these digital sources, like wearables and apps and devices, to improve clinical care in patient’s lives?” Estrin asked a crowd of about 200 people at the second annual Arizona Digital Health Symposium.

Then, her response.

“It’s so much easier said than done,” she said.

Estrin, associate dean for impact and the Robert V. Tishman ’37 Professor at Cornell Tech, was the morning keynote speaker for the event held at Arizona State University’s Health Futures Center in Phoenix on May 8.

The symposium, sponsored by ASU Health, brought together health leaders in academia, health care, government, community and the nonprofit sector to accelerate the creation and adoption of innovative technologies aimed at improving the health of Arizonans.

The potential of digital health improving health outcomes for Arizonans — and how to overcome its pitfalls — were the primary topics in the daylong event, which included featured speakers, panel discussions and a technology showcase.

Digital health includes a wide range of technologies and applications, including mobile health, internet health, health information technology, wearable devices, telehealth and telemedicine, artificial intelligence and machine learning, and personalized medicine.

Estrin said the development of digital health technology over the last 10 years has made her hopeful that it can translate to better health outcomes.

As an example, she cited “wearables,” body-worn electronic devices like smartwatches, patches or rings that track, collect and transmit physiological data to apps for health management and clinical diagnosis.

Estrin specifically cited the Food and Drug Administration’s decision in 2022 — following a decade of research studies, development and testing — to approve software that uses Apple Watch sensors to monitor Parkinson’s disease symptoms.

With advancements in AI, Estrin added, the testing cycle can be accelerated, providing patients quicker entrée to such technologies.

Conversely, several speakers said a continuing challenge regarding digital health is the “digital divide,” where affluent populations can access health care technology more readily than poorer communities.

In the keynote panel discussion titled “Advancing Health Data Integration across Arizona,” Theresa Cullen, public health director of the Pima County Health Department, said the digital divide is reflected in life expectancy and life mortality.

“If you were doing internet infrastructure, you would talk about the last mile,” Cullen said. “What I would say is there’s a last mile in health care delivery, specifically in rural areas and in vulnerable populations that have high social determinants of health.”

Cullen said rural areas need “community technologists” — health care workers who understand technology and can communicate the data produced from technology to their patients.

Panelist Matthew Scotch, associate dean and professor in ASU’s College of Health Solutions, addressed how technology can impact the relationship between patients and their physicians.

“When I go to the doctor and I show them things I’ve tracked on my phone, health status things that I’ve personally collected, there’s been such a discrepancy between how the doctor reacts to that data,” Scotch said. “Some take it very seriously. Others think that I don’t know what I’m doing and it’s really just a waste of time.

“Can we build more robust and standardized personal health records that can integrate with different physician practices?”

The afternoon keynote speaker, Eric Hekler, professor in the Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science at University of California, San Diego, tuned the day’s focus from technology to the human relations aspect of digital health and the need for a partnership between, as he put it, the lived experience and trained experience.

“Our aspiration is safe, effective, accessible, equitable, sustainable and scalable interventions that can advance individual, community and population health,” Hekler said. “That’s a lot of competing criteria that are pushing tension with each other. Figuring that out requires building the right technological infrastructure.”

That infrastructure, Hekler added, must include groups like federally qualified health centers, community clinics and public health departments so the technological advancements don't "fail to address real-world barriers, overlook accessibility constraints and ignore experiential wisdom of those navigating health systems."

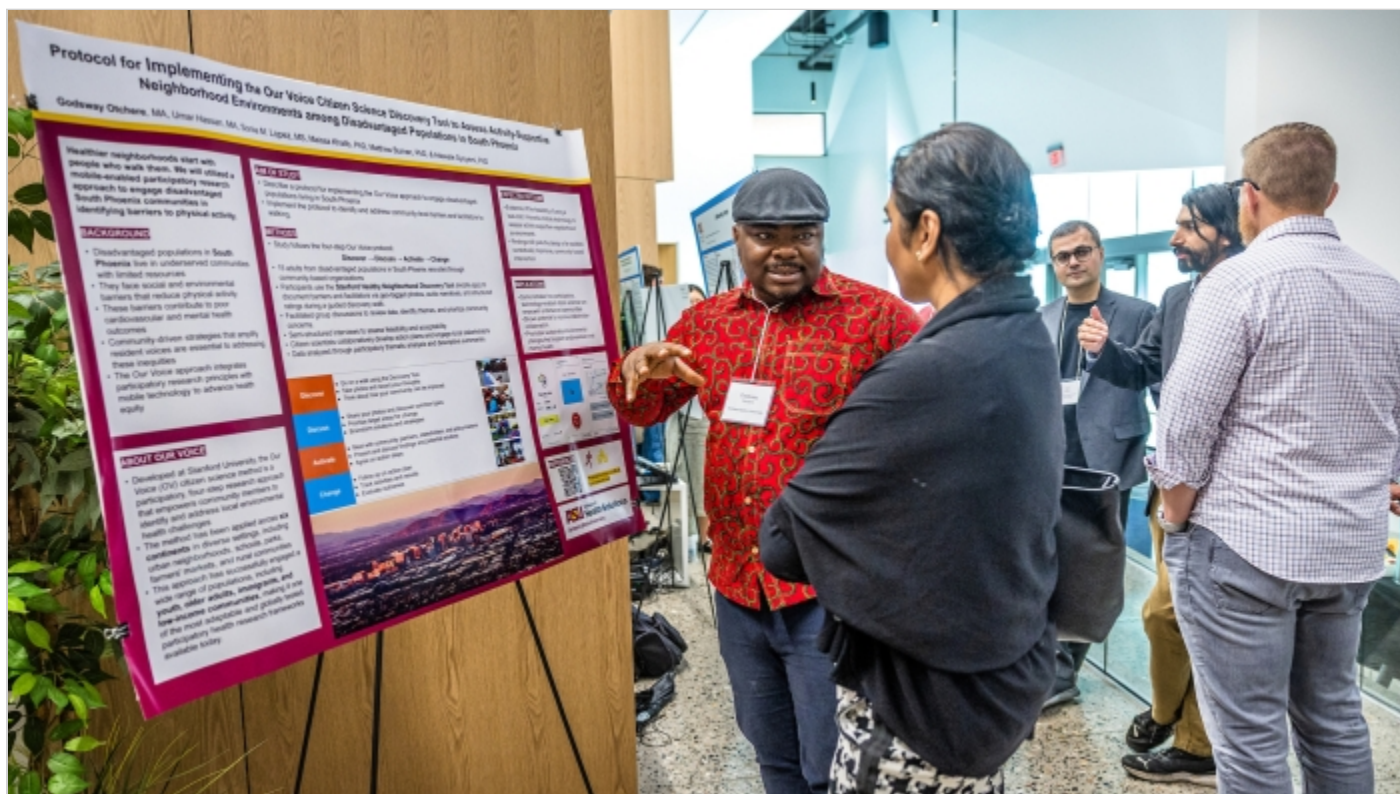
"Who has the most holistic grasp of reality?" Hekler said. "Who in the room has the most relevant expertise for each decision? Don't rely on unconscious associations between credentials and competence. Sometimes, the right role for credentialed members is to listen."

If digital health technology is not designed for "people that actually fit into the real world," Hekler said, there's little likelihood of adopting the technology.

"So, this sort of cascading effect from knowledge to evidence generation to adoption, we all need to be working with," he said. "How do you handle this issue of divide from development to delivery? Our answer is ultimately robust partnerships that carefully honor the value of both the lived and trained experience."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Godway Otchere, a doctoral student in population health in the College of Health Solutions, talks about his research team's work in a poster presentation at the Arizona Digital Health Symposium on Tuesday, May 5, at ASU's Health Futures Center in Phoenix. The research was focused on

assisting disadvantaged populations in south Phoenix, and was one of two dozen research projects featured at the symposium. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Professor Matthew Scotch, associate dean of the College of Health Solutions, speaks on a panel on advancing health data integration across Arizona at the Arizona Digital Health Symposium held Tuesday, May 5, at ASU's Health Futures Center in Phoenix. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News