The future of biometrics in healthcare

By Pine Pienaar   8 Apr 2019

The idea of using biometrics in the healthcare sector is not new, but it is one that hasn't been explored or exploited to its full potential.

Pine Pienaar, managing director at Afiswitch

A biometrics-based project was first piloted by health workers in three South African provinces back in 2005. The project was driven by the national and provincial health departments and made use of biometric technology, sponsored by the private sector that allowed for patient identification using fingerprints. The aim of the project involved establishing a central "infomediary" to collect and reference key medical information on behalf of patients.

At the time it was certainly recognised that this kind of technologically enabled service could boast significant benefits for patients and public and private healthcare providers, alike. Though regrettably, despite being sound in its intentions, neither the initial piloted project nor similar projects that followed have seen widespread adoption and implementation.

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Fast-forward 14 years and today, in the digital age, the opportunity for widespread implementation of biometrics across the

healthcare sector is not only far greater but, in my mind, bodes two crucial advantages that should not be ignored.

#1 Improved patient care

Patient identification errors – and especially cases that lead to a patient receiving inappropriate care - are not only deeply troubling but can hold reputational, financial and even legal implications for healthcare professionals and facilities, alike.

Biometric solutions offer an effective tool for patient identification and authentication – whereby a patient's medical information can be matched to a unique identifier such as their fingerprint and stored in a master database or central patient index.

Biometrics are accurate and thereby more secure than, for instance, scenarios where using an identification number which may be entered incorrectly during a multiple service provider registration processes or falsifying information can be eliminated and patient information accuracy improved.

Additionally, the patient information stored in the master database or central patient index can be accessed and used by a variety of verified and registered health and wellness professionals or facilities, without each needing to perform biometric enrolment multiple times. This can create far more streamlined access to up-to-date patient medical history and thereby lead to improved overall patient care.

Biometrics, in turn, can be implemented by public and private healthcare facilities for internal purposes in order to identify and verify healthcare personnel to enable compliance with industry standards regarding background screening processes, as well as, providing various audit trails for reporting purposes namely; shift work, payroll and patient allocation.

#2 Combatting medical fraud

Medical fraud is a growing phenomenon globally – and South Africa is not unaffected. Speaking at the Council for Medical Schemes' recent Fraud, Waste and Abuse Summit, Katlego Mothundi, MD of the Board of Healthcare Funders of SA (BHF), stated that up to 25% of the money paid by members as medical scheme contributions or premiums annually is lost due to fraud, corruption, abuse and wastage. The cumulative monetary loss is estimated at between R22bn and R28bn a year.

Medical fraud can be as a result of illicit actions by a health service provider or a patient, with the intention to deceive or misrepresent medical information to the advantage of one party's individual gain over the medical scheme provider. However, the significant monetary losses in the industry is not the only negative or detrimental effect of medical fraud - fraud can also cause genuine patients to lose out on access to quality care, loss of medical benefits and/or receiving unnecessary or incorrect treatment or medication. This can all affect the patients continued health and well-being.

It's not surprising then that more medical schemes are deploying advanced data intelligence solutions to mine and discover patterns and trends in member and provider behaviour, alike. But what if all authorisations and full medical data pertaining

to patients/members and health and wellness providers could be attached to their individual unique digital signature, such as a fingerprint...

This would certainly enforce "know your patient" values and, because the data will be trackable using a biometric digital signature, it makes it easier for medical schemes to detect trends and thereby significantly reduce occurrences of medical fraud.

Rapid technological advances – from the pervasiveness of the internet and adoption of disruptive technologies like cloud, mobility and the Internet of Things (IoT), for example – continue to facilitate biometrics adoption.

Today, devices and solutions can and are being designed and built to address specific application needs. In fact, there are already examples of palm, fingerprint and iris scanning biometric solutions being implemented and tested across medical and healthcare facilities globally. And, as the local market follows the curve of this trend, we expect that more widespread adoption of biometrics with the aim of protecting patients, professionals and medical scheme providers, alike, is merely a matter of timing.

ABOUT PINE PIENAAR

Pine Pienaar is the Managing Director of Afiswitch, a role he stepped into in 2008, with the purpose of further entrenching his decades worth of biometric and AFIS experience into Afiswitch's service offering to the market.
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