

**Future of Healthcare
Week Asia**

**Panel discussion:
Reimagining
public health
through
personalised
healthcare**

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As covid-19 unfolds, policymakers and public health professionals are working to understand and act on the lessons learned during the pandemic. Personalised healthcare (PHC), which combines data with emerging technologies, has the potential to scale from individuals to entire populations, improving patient outcomes and increasing the efficiency and sustainability of healthcare systems.

To explore the ways PHC can enhance public health, Economist Impact programmed an expert panel comprising Ahmed Elhusseiny, area head APAC, Roche Pharma; Dr Robert JT Morris, chief technology strategist, Office for Healthcare Transformation, Ministry of Health, Government of Singapore, and professor, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore; and Dr Tikki Pangestu, visiting professor, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore. A summary of the discussion follows:

The promise of personalised healthcare

Ahmed Elhusseiny defines PHC as using data to match “the right patients to the right therapies” and to tailor therapies to patient needs. PHC can be leveraged to inform research and development, optimise treatment options and support strong patient outcomes, enable the creation of integrated care pathways and design public health measures that can shift the focus from treatment to prevention – while building sustainable health systems. In these ways, PHC can benefit both individuals’ and population health.

PHC builds on two trends that accelerated during the pandemic. The first is a greater reliance on technology and a shift in healthcare delivery – moving care outside a clinical setting. For instance, Robert Morris notes that, in some countries, the adoption of teleconsultation increased over 30 times. To prevent overcrowding of emergency rooms, Singapore deployed chatbots to help people determine whether they needed to visit a hospital.

The second trend is a shift towards patient choice. For example, as Tikki Pangestu observes, people had to choose which vaccine to use, how often to be tested and how to respond if they began to show covid-19 symptoms.

Data connectivity and empowering patients

Increases in data and connectivity benefit patients and healthcare systems. Remote monitoring allows clinicians to track vital signs, such as a patient's blood pressure, without a face-to-face consultation. Robert Morris says this "lets people know that someone is listening and watching out for them," which encourages patients to take a more active role in managing their health. It also enables basic health coaching, which may not require a practitioner's involvement.

Remote monitoring plays a central role in the concept of "shift left", a term that describes the movement of the locus of care from the hospital, to the specialist's office, to the general practitioner's clinic, to the patient's home. Each of these steps reduces spend and increases people's ownership of their health.

The "shift left" concept also helps governments contain the rising costs that accompany rapidly ageing populations and the associated chronic disease burden. "Every country in the world is going to be bankrupted by healthcare unless we do something," says Robert Morris, who sees data as a key to increasing system efficiency and allocating healthcare resources, such as vaccines, more effectively.

Wearables—monitoring devices built into wristwatches and rings—provide people with a rich, continuous stream of information about their health. Data from wearables allows actions, such as changes to diet or sleep schedules, to be tailored to the individual in much the same way tech companies personalise ads in social media streams. As the speed and coverage of data networks improve, this technology is becoming increasingly available via smartphones to people in low- and middle-income countries.

However, Tikki Pangestu cautions there is a tendency to "get carried away with the revolution in digital technology". From a global health perspective, he recommends taking a holistic view that focuses on preventative rather than curative strategies, citing the importance of primary care, immunisation, nutrition, and better water and sanitation

Data governance and collaboration

The speed with which covid-19 vaccines were developed illustrates the power of collaboration between the private and public sectors. Both Ahmed Elhusseiny and Tikki Pangestu believe strong collaboration and support from multilateral organisations can facilitate these partnerships, citing the United Nations' role in the COP26 climate change conference as an example.

The pandemic also demonstrated that public trust in the quality and sources of health information is critically important. Robert Morris says that, in both rich and poor countries, trust in governments is at a record low, and this is contributing to the anti-vaccination movement in Europe.

He acknowledges the risk of data being potentially misused, and says there is a danger that people might “think they're being manipulated, they're being spied on, or their data is being stolen”. These issues, as well as concerns about data security and patient privacy, could prevent PHC from achieving its full potential – and should be addressed.

“Building trust takes a long time, but it's easy to break,” adds Ahmed Elhusseiny. He stressed that trust and transparency around data is vital to unleash its enormous potential and that collaboration across the ecosystem is foundational to widespread adoption.

Large-scale PHC programmes—like the ongoing project to capture the genomes of 50,000 volunteers in Thailand—need to consider how data is captured, structured and formalised to ensure maximum benefit and impact.

Data must also be seen in the context of local capabilities, resources and political exigencies. “Data without local context is meaningless,” concludes Tikki Pangestu.

Key takeaways

- PHC can benefit individuals as well as entire populations
- PHC capitalises on advances in technology and the rise of patient-centred care
- Enhanced data connectivity and powerful smartphones allow developing countries to reap the benefits of PHC
- PHC encourages people to take ownership of their health, thereby improving patient and population health outcomes
- PHC can help governments manage the rising costs that accompany ageing populations by bringing in system efficiencies, reducing waste and enabling smarter resource allocation
- Data security, privacy and trust are essential if PHC is to reach its full potential
- Collaboration across the healthcare ecosystem, support from multilateral organisations and strong partnership between public and private sectors will play a strong role in scaling PHC to deliver on its promise.



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