Mobile apps offer suicide intervention potential, but oversight is lacking

By Joseph Goedert

Mobile apps may help address the needs of persons at risk of suicide, according to results of a study conducted at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

However, more vigilance is needed to ensure that apps that are available are effective in heading off potential life-threatening events.

In the project, researchers assessed six types of mobile apps that could help in depression management—these include mood and suicidal thought tracking; safety plan development; recommendation of activities to deter suicidal thoughts; information and education; access to support networks; and access to emergency counseling.

Worldwide, an estimated 800,000 people commit suicide, and about 16 million make a suicide attempt each year.

Timely identification of persons at risk for suicide is important to ensure adequate provision of care. Some 60 percent of individuals with suicidal ideation transitioned to a first attempt within a year of onset, which is a significant number considering that half to two-thirds of suicide deaths occur in the first attempt. More than 90 percent of persons who died by suicide had depression, alcohol abuse or both.

A search by researchers found 2,690 potentially relevant apps related to suicide, and 69 met inclusion criteria. However, six apps, including two apps available in major app stores and downloaded more than one million times each, provided an erroneous crisis helpline number. Further, only 69 apps included all six evidence-based suicide prevention strategies, researchers noted.

"This demonstrates a failure of Apple and Google app stores and the health app industry in self-governance, and quality and safety assurance," they added. "Governance levels should be stratified by the risk and benefits to users of the app, such as when suicide prevention advice is provided."

Even so, apps play a major role in helping those prone to suicidal thoughts. Some 40 percent of persons contemplating suicide don't seek medical care or have access to care, but digital interventions delivered online or through mobile apps may increase access to help. Patients feel more at ease discussing mental health issues online than in a face-to-face encounter.

With the health app market growing in the past decade to include 318,000 apps with 10,000 mental health apps, selecting appropriate apps is not particularly easy for laypersons. Digital mental health interventions appear to offer a promising alternative to face-to-face visits; however, very few apps in app stores have been evaluated in clinical trials, researchers contend.

"Previous research on the use of digital health for suicide prevention focused on highlighting features of an ideal intervention systematically reviewing the effectiveness of online interventions and mobile apps, app store descriptions of apps or assessing suicide prevention strategies offered by apps. However, none of these studies evaluated suicide prevention advice offered by apps."

The complete study is available here.

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