TAPPING INTO THAILAND'S DIGITAL POTENTIAL FOR GREATER HEALTHCARE SUSTAINABILITY

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Once complex, costly, and limited, digital healthcare solutions are now more accessible than ever. With the world moving towards a highly digitalized ecosystem, digital solutions should now be a prerequisite in generating better healthcare outcomes rather than just providing novel benefits.

Digital solutions effectively improve how patients access healthcare services and engage with healthcare providers and prescribers. Such digital solutions – especially with the continued growth in online connectivity – play a vital role in making healthcare access more sustainable, not only in terms of access but also in sustaining treatment adherence or in reducing capacity burdens at healthcare institutions and reaching patients wherever they are.

As one of Southeast Asia's digital leaders, Thailand has gradually expanded its digital maturity. This makes the country poised to accelerate its digital healthcare ecosystem to foster greater outcomes for people across the country.

OVERCOMING EXISTING ECOSYSTEM CHALLENGES

Thailand has been working to ensure affordable access to medicines. Through its universal healthcare program, Thailand has been reinforcing its healthcare security and addressing healthcare sustainability by considerably improving access to treatment and medication for people nationwide. Even the private healthcare sphere is dedicating resources to help patients get the treatment they need via access initiatives such as Patient Adherence Programs (PAPs) and Patient Support Programs (PSPs).

Yet, as the country's population grows and the country experiences demographic changes, Thailand's healthcare system will continue to face challenges in terms of non-communicable diseases – such as diabetes, where the number of people with the disease is expected to reach 5.3 million by 2040 and cancer, whereby the number one cause of deaths in Thailand since 1998.
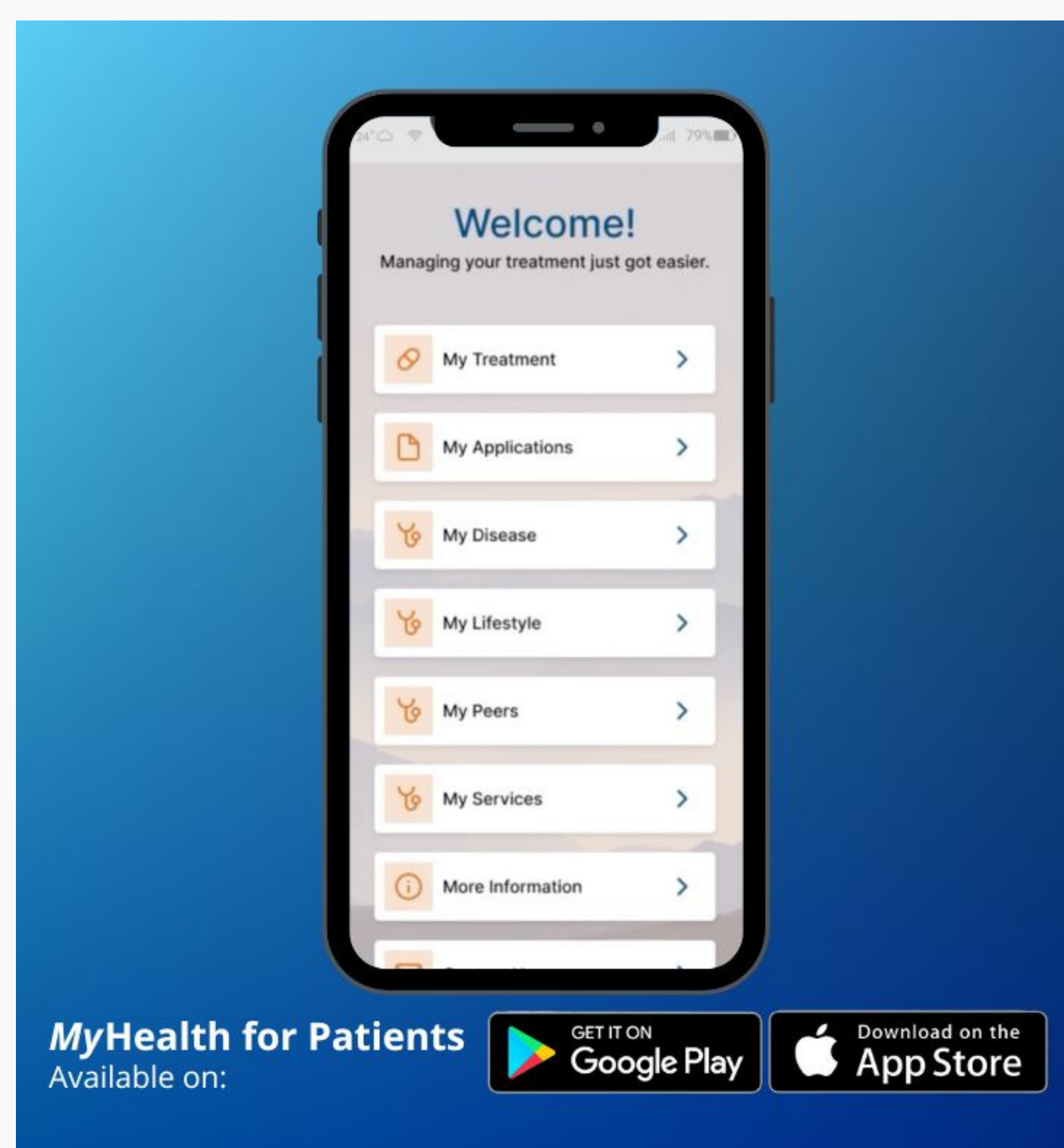
Treatment and innovative medication for diseases such as cancer can be expensive and thus inaccessible to all societal segments.

Furthermore, access to specialized centers, specifically outside urban centers, also remains challenging. If left unchecked, these emerging issues may impact long-term healthcare sustainability, creating a gap when it comes to medical outcomes for patients, but also impeding the way healthcare providers - i.e., physicians, payers, prescribers - i.e., pharmacists, and the government engages with patients effectively.

THAILAND'S INNATE DIGITAL POTENTIAL FOR HEALTHCARE

Today, Thailand possesses high growing internet penetration, is already one of Southeast Asia's leading internet economies and is a forerunner in the region's 5G race. As it evolves to drive continuous quality of life improvements, healthcare will be a priority sector; it is a cornerstone of the Thailand 4.0 socio-economic roadmap, and its digitalization, guided by the national eHealth Strategy, seeks to tap into the nation's increasing digital appetite to improve healthcare delivery. This strong commitment is reflected in how Thailand's digital health growth is a key priority for both public and private organizations, not just via start-ups and user adoption.

Still, Thailand has only just begun to tap into its inherent digital healthcare potential, which it can harness to reinforce its healthcare ecosystem. As telehealth services expand in line with growing digital demand, the country's healthcare stakeholders must investigate the different dimensions of healthcare access in the nation and assess how they can overcome existing gaps. Such efforts must focus on patient access and adherence to ensure the sector's longer-term sustainability in the new digital frontier.

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THE DIGITAL DIFFERENCE

While pricing and reimbursement in strict terms remain outside of its remit, digital also has a role to play – a vital one at that – in broadening access and supporting existing initiatives. This is to ensure that the initiatives it supports are effective and strive towards interconnected health.

Axios International's experience in managing PAPs and PSPs has shown us that the right approach is always to identify the gaps along the patient journey, determine the stakeholders involved and provide a customized approach. Throughout this journey, digital helps build bridges between the necessary stakeholders – so that physicians are kept informed about what happens to their patients outside the hospital envir.

On the other hand, patients can continue to receive multidimensional care. This includes interventions such as education on medication by trusted healthcare professionals, training, support, and virtual reminders to improve medication-taking behavior. All of this in a systematic and safe environment in accordance with international and local data protection regulations.

ALL ABOARD THE THAILAND 4.0 TRAIN TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE HEALTHCARE

Thailand is building the necessary foundations to boost its healthcare ecosystem by going digital; it already has a range of different digital tools aimed at helping healthcare ecosystem stakeholders manage patient access and outcomes. This includes the H4U app, launched in 2018 to create and store patient profiles; the Smart Health ID patient administration cloud service; and continuous R&D to explore more digital health delivery areas.

This shows that the nation understands that healthcare digitalization can play an instrumental role in improving accessibility by complementing and even enhancing, physical systems. It shifts the focus toward patient-centric care systems and helps healthcare providers make more strategic, informed decisions reaching patients wherever they are all to provide better-quality care.

With Thailand already in the thick of the 5G revolution and continuing to grow in its digital maturity, the time is now ripe for digital health in the country to take another significant leap forward.

We are already seeing the advancements applied to enhance digital healthcare delivery. At this critical juncture, one must do this with a sharp focus on getting all healthcare stakeholders involved. Only then can improved patient outcomes be achieved and – most importantly – sustained.

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THE AUTHOR IS A DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION EXPERT WITH OVER TEN YEARS OF DIGITAL EXPERIENCE IN DRIVING INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES AND TRANSFORMING BUSINESS FUNCTIONS VIA DIGITAL OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT IN EUROPE, ASIA, AND AMERICA.

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