



2017 HITLAB
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INNOVATOR SPOTLIGHT: MICHELLE ODLUM, EDD, HITLAB SCHOLAR

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by Yvonne Bokhour

Many of our readers will remember Dr. Michelle Odlum from her presentation last December at the HITLAB Innovators Summit. The talk, "Nigeria, Ebola, and Twitter: Early Epidemic Detection through Tweet Analysis," created quite a stir.

She said social media tools such as Twitter may well track and confirm epidemics faster than current methods. For example, in one country, more than 1,000 tweets announced the presence of an outbreak an entire day before the government issued an alert.

Dr. Odlum's belief in social media's "limitless" ability to increase comprehension is but one example of her forward-thinking leadership, which she applies to the most pressing public health issues of our time. An assistant professor of nursing at Columbia University's School of Nursing and a Scholar at HITLAB, she is especially interested in social, cultural, and economic determinants of health, and downright passionate about social equity. Dr. Odlum works tirelessly to eliminate health disparities in vulnerable populations, not only to improve health care access and delivery, but also to empower communities.

To fulfill her noble mission, Dr. Odlum relies in large part on health information technology (HIT), an interest that began when she accepted a position with Dr. Suzanne Bakken, Alumni Professor of Nursing and Professor of Biomedical Informatics at Columbia University. Their goal? The development of an internet-based Personal Health Record for an adult population living with HIV/AIDS in New York City.

She remembers, "During our focus groups, care providers were not convinced their patients would access and utilize such a system. In fact, the patient population had low functional and computer literacy, and limited access to the internet."

But Dr. Odlum was pleased to see the providers' doubts disproved. "What made me proud was over time, these patients were using the system. They accessed their health information for social services benefits and granted temporary access to providers if they ended up in the ER. This was empowering to the patients."

As her first foray into health information technology, the project was more than inspirational; it sparked real commitment. She explains, "In this position I learned the power of technology in supporting and overcoming health disparities and, most important, the power of technology to promote the Institute of Medicine's recommendation for patient-centered care."

Dr. Odlum was so impressed, she focused her doctoral dissertation on the effort. She remains "driven" by patient empowerment, convinced that "giving health consumers access to health information using low cost technological tools is exceptionally potent."

A woman of many skills (including research, monitoring, and evaluation methodology; program and data management; advanced statistical methods and multivariate techniques; and data analysis—to name but a few), Dr. Odlum is currently involved in several HIT research projects. One supports the development of a mobile app-based HIV risk reduction intervention. Another is exploring how social factors and HIT influence the choice of health professions.

We asked Dr. Odlum, what do you think is the most exciting health innovation or HIT trend happening right now? She replied, "Wearable medical technology is amazing. They are key to how healthcare will be practiced in the future. These devices allow for the early warning of disease onset and the monitoring of chronic diseases including diabetes and hypertension."

She believes wearables have "tremendous implications for health and well-being in addition to the reduction of healthcare expenditures. The challenge has and will be the ongoing data collection with thousands of data points captured with these devices. However, big data analytics research is finding ways to effectively use such data." To illustrate this point, Dr. Odlum cites "thorough, N-of-1 or single subject research. This research allows for an individual patient to be the sole unit of observation and, more importantly, allows for optimal intervention development."

Dr. Odlum has a clear vision for the future of healthcare innovations. Noting that health disparities are "essentially defined by low socioeconomic status and

low literacy,” Dr. Odium believes patient-centered care is optimal when patients understand their health. To improve health outcomes, it’s important to allow for effective dialogue with healthcare providers. She explains, “Ongoing technological advancement has allowed for universal access through smartphones and the widespread dissemination of health data that is comprehensible to all through social networking sites and over mediums.”

She believes “technology is key for the elimination of health disparities,” a philosophy we at HITLAB share most heartily. It’s been our pleasure to work with Dr. Odium. We’re looking forward to collaborating in the future, and can’t wait to see what she contributes to the field of health information technology in the years ahead.

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