Physician in your pocket: is technology good or evil?

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The smartphones are becoming a key part of each and every healthcare professionals and it will further grow in the coming years. It is the fastest –spreading technology in the human history with over 6.8 billion mobile subscriptions in the space of a decade.

Smartphones are routinely used for medical education and medical practice. The medical students are using educational apps and doctors are using apps related to clinical practice such as medical calculator apps or drug reference apps. The mobile technology has shown to improve health outcomes for chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension.

This revolution is plainly shaking up the health sector and Ophthalmology is no exception. Currently, there are more than 60 Ophthalmology related applications available from Apple's popular iPhone and other smartphone platforms like Android, Symbian and Windows Phone. The screening apps are available for visual acuity, visual field, color vision tests, contrast sensitivity, IOL calculations, glaucoma screening and much more. A standard photo application on any smartphone can be used to take a very good quality slit lamp photographs of the anterior segment of the eye.

The smartphone technology is indeed a very powerful tool for facilitating team working and communication between healthcare providers. However, there are potential negative implications in terms of distraction and inappropriate exchange of confidential patient information. As compared to pagers, smartphones can receive personal communication during working hours and lead to unprofessional behavior. How often do we see professionals busy with smartphones and students playing games on their smartphones even during prime hours? The frequent checking for messages and "e-mail beeps" during teaching and consultation are definitely distracting.

Related to medical knowledge, which is freely available, there is no governing body, which regulates medical apps to ensure that the content is current, valid and reliable.

Smartphones are certainly "smart" to have created positive impact on health care industry but it is also a source of interruption, distraction and multitasking in hospital environment. There is increasing awareness related to negative consequences of smartphones and the need for "digital professionalism" to maximize the benefit of smartphones while reducing the potential for adverse outcome and distraction.