

Changing Patient Perception of Disease

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Abstract: *The world is gearing up to a new normal which is marked with virtual¹ ways of working, remote healthcare and doctor consultations. But for the health and wellness sector, the pandemic had one more significant impact – changed consumer and patient perception of disease and health & wellness. Consumers no longer want to take their health for granted, they are actively involved in managing their health and wellness even before a disease strikes. At the same time, individuals who were suffering from any chronic illness, viral infections, or others as well, have started looking at their condition with more focus. They are scrutinizing their lifestyle, habits and environmental factors that lead to a disease flare up and trying to manage them proactively. They are adopting ways to improve their immunity and overall state of health.*

Keywords: Health, wellness, health awareness, disease management, microbiome, immunity

1. Introduction

Understanding patient experience in a disease journey, following their treatment journey, looking at the functional and emotional issues that patients deal with, has long been a focus of the brand and category teams in Pharma companies. This gives them vital insights into what a patient is actually going through and what is working or not working for them. Often enough it gives pharma companies ideas on innovations and interventions to aid patient disease awareness. Brand teams use a suite of research techniques to get to these insights, real time and retrospective studies, user surveys, focused group discussions, social media chatter, all supplement this process.

Back in 2020 when we were sitting at the epicenter of an unprecedented epidemic, this landscape of user chatter suddenly got an impetus. Patients suffering from chronic diseases or those suffering from any ailment at all, pregnant women, the elderly who suffered from one or more chronic conditions, new mothers or parents of infants and toddlers, all of these stakeholder groups were suddenly engaging a lot more on social media channels, on disease discussion boards; over 70 - 80% increase in chatter volumes between 2019 and 2020 for some conditions like viral diseases (HPV, cough and cold) in general. Some of these conversations were out of nervousness but many were informed discussions where patients expressed a perspective on how wellness and disease management becomes more important for any condition they could be suffering from. In primary survey conducted by the agency IPSOS it was observed that 62% Americans believed that their health is more important to them now than pre - pandemic¹.

2. From treatment to prevention and wellness

When patients and consumers spoke about their propensity towards cough and cold or when they spoke about multiple gut ailments, they discussed and recommended to others how immunity development products and products that aid prevention were more important. Many patients were more engaged in maintaining a healthy gut and gut conditions that were earlier not always treated with medications or with systematic treatment regimes, like an irritable bowel syndrome or chronic constipation and diarrhea, were now a

focus for overall health and immunity. The value of having healthy intestinal flora was realized more than ever before and many patients focused on herbs, home remedies, medications, that helped them build and maintain this. In the case of infants and toddlers immunity development and prevention meant looking at ingredients and products that were safe for their gut but also came in formats they enjoyed. Channels such as Instagram and Pinterest became a hub of user generated recipes and treatment options. Wellness which has been the focus of the pharma industry or the healthcare providers and regulatory bodies, now after all these experiences, seems to have finally taken center stage in the patients' minds too¹.

But getting away from the treatment landscape, there is a whole new dimension we see as evolving in patient perception of certain diseases – diseases such as Herpes (oral Herpes or genital Herpes)⁴ and a whole host of viral infections that are contagious and limit an individual's options in their daily lives. These patients were looking for curative solutions and in the absence of those, treatments that help prevent recurrence². Social media discussions for conditions such as Herpes⁵ were observed to have doubled in 2020, over the 2019 volume. These increased conversations were not always expressing a concern but many were just exchange of disease experience and experience with specific medications. Infections with the Herpes family of viruses are acquired in childhood and remain lifelong; the only resort for patients is effective management to reduce recurrence. Increased chatter meant numerous treatment options and disease management regimes being discussed, patients being more watchful of what could lead to an outbreak.

Respiratory infections and allergies were some other conditions where increased chatter could be observed. Patients suffering from Sinusitis or those with infections of the airways and lungs, were more willing to explore treatment options not tried in the past, sometimes it also meant increased willingness towards invasive therapies such as sinus surgery.

3. Viewing the symptoms in different light

Did patients who already suffer from an equally infectious illness and that they know is lifelong, feel differently about

their own condition or the Pandemic? Perception here was divided, for conditions such as Herpes patients felt they have been dealing with something even more difficult. Many conversations appreciated the brands that were effective in limiting their blisters or sores or helped in quick healing. They believed viral infections can be fought with the right class of medicines. At the same time there were others suffering from Oral Herpes and similar conditions who were increasingly nervous. They were viewing the symptoms and their condition, which they had got used to managing so far, in a very different light. They were more cautious now to not pass it to their children or others in the family and expressed concern about the fact that no cure can be found for such conditions.

In case of respiratory illnesses patients were more concerned about their own increased predisposition towards new infections. Symptoms such as unproductive coughing or Flu like symptoms were viewed with caution. However, the predominant sentiment of patients was the need to transition towards an overall state of well being. Individuals sought treatment regimens that would help their overall fitness level. This led to sudden spike in Pinterest posts on homemade recipes for immunity boosting. Discussions in Forums on respiratory illnesses or Flu often circled around finding treatments that not just prevented recurrence but boosted overall levels of fitness.

An ingredients pyramid created with analysis of this social media chatter revealed that people spoke more often about the health benefits of commonly available ingredients such as ginger, turmeric, honey, mint, Elderberry, Apple Cider Vinegar, and how these simple ingredients when used in specific recipes could be an immunity booster. Individuals were observed talking about microbiome and how important it was to have healthy gut microbiome for overall fitness. Across geographies, it was observed that individuals spoke of their traditional recipes that have been made for generations and have pro or prebiotic properties, such as *Kefir*, *Kombucha* or many other fermented foods³.

4. In conclusion

As the world gears up to new ways of working in the post Pandemic world and “virtual” ways of doing things takes center stage, there is a parallel trend that has grown and been adopted by individuals in their personal realms – focus on wellness. Pre pandemic wellness messages were predominantly driven by Pharmaceutical companies or Consumer Health majors and consumer adoption was driven by their health needs. Post Pandemic, consumers across the globe started picking up on this wellness focus on their own, sometimes going back to their traditional recipes and ingredients known to have immunity building benefits and sometimes exploring new compositions with advise from online and offline channels. While all this has been afoot, its important to note that consumer adoption of branded products in the space has been guarded, if their social media chatter is to be believed. The reason being this informed and aware league of consumers has been seeking therapies with no side effects or ingredients which are purely natural so as not to introduce new risk factors. In either case this is a

positive trend poised to help improve the state of wellness across regions.

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