A Novel Appointment Reminder for Homeless Patients

The Burden of Missed Appointments at Homeless Clinics: Clinic no-shows at outpatient clinics result in decreased efficiency, loss of revenue, and a community loss of patients who would have benefited from medical care. Through Hannah’s research efforts in creating and mailing a survey to 186 homeless clinics across the country this problem was identified. No-shows account for 15–25% of scheduled appointments in outpatient clinics across the country. One location estimates their losses at over $750.00 per day. Efforts are being made to decrease the rate of no-shows with electronic reminder systems like emails and text messages, but the nature of homeless life does not align with these reminder methods. Utah reported no-show rates are between 20–40% in general visits and 50–55% for behavior health visits. Some studies have found disadvantaged people three times more likely to miss appointments. This encouraged our team to look for a way to help this very hard to reach population.

Creating a Solution: A wearable device made sense, as long as it could be durable enough and disguised to meet the needs of a homeless life. Sam worked with his patients at the 4th Street Clinic in Salt Lake City to come up with a design which would be worn all of the time and alarm the patient 24 hours, one hour, and 15 minutes before the time of their appointment. Our team worked with students and faculty in the department of engineering to produce a prototype. We anticipate testing this device in the next month.

“...It’s still dark when I pick him up from the Inn Between and we drive across town as the sun breaks the horizon. We arrive at the cancer treatment center to find the doors locked. We wander around, me in total ignorance and disbelief that Jim could have gotten his appointment 3 hours wrong.

We drive around the sleepy city to kill time. Jim knows these streets well and tells me when and where to turn. He’s kept a connection to this place all his life but mostly he tells me stories of other places. Like his time in a Harley bike gang.

Eventually we go in and Jim is hooked up to bags of drugs. These nurses don’t seem to know that Jim is technically homeless but Dr. John Song says there’s research that shows the homeless are not treated well in traditional healthcare facilities. He says homeless people are “...are really worried that when they do end up in healthcare facilities that they won’t be treated with respect.” This keeps many homeless individuals from ever seeking preventative care. All too often the homeless won’t show up in medical centers until their conditions reach advanced stages.

When I visit a week later Jim is shaving. He says he’s been up all night with anxiety because today I’m taking him to the doctor to find out if the chemo is working.”

~Daniel Lombardi