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Technology, innovation and transforming healthcare faster, smarter and together: A conversation with Dr. Rasu Shrestha

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Abstract

As part of our special issue on Innovation and Technology we had the pleasure of speaking with a visionary leader, Physician and healthcare executive, Dr. Rasu Shrestha, executive vice president and chief strategy officer at Atrium Health. In the conversation with Dr. Shrestha we were able to cover the foundational ideas of innovation and technology. We also explored its opportunities and potential pitfalls. Ultimately, we looked at the topic through the lenses of the human experience we provide in healthcare and how through a clear focus on experience and the effective integration of innovation and technology in those efforts, we can achieve the best in outcomes for all we serve in healthcare.

Keywords

Health information technology, innovation, human experience patient experience, Atrium Health

A conversation with Dr. Rasu Shrestha

As part of our special issue on Innovation and Technology I had the pleasure of speaking with a visionary leader, Physician and healthcare executive, Dr. Rasu Shrestha. Dr. Shrestha is currently executive vice president and chief strategy officer at Atrium Health. At Atrium Health, he's responsible for enterprise strategy and developing the organization's current strategic roadmap. In addition, he's spearheading Atrium's renewed focus on innovation, launching new healthcare inventions, discoveries, and ideas that will benefit patients and the communities that Atrium Health serves. Dr. Shrestha is truly a visionary in this field and a respected contributor to the conversation around innovation, technology, and their intersection with the human experience in healthcare. In addition to this interview commentary in *Patient Experience Journal*, my conversation with Dr. Shrestha can also be heard in soon to be released episode of The Beryl Institute's Podcast Series *To Care is Human*.

(http://bit.ly/Podcast_ToCareisHuman)

In my conversation with Dr. Shrestha we were able to cover the foundational ideas of innovation and technology. We also explored its opportunities and potential pitfalls. Ultimately, we looked at the topic through the lenses of the human experience we provide in healthcare and how through a clear focus on experience and the effective integration of innovation and technology in those efforts, we can achieve the best in outcomes for all we serve in healthcare.

How do you personally define innovation in healthcare? And in what ways do you believe innovation and technology can positively impact healthcare today?

Innovation is an interesting word and it's a word that the industry has latched onto in the last few years. A chief innovation officer and an innovation department or related function wasn't something that was omnipresent across health systems in the past. And today, you see more and more of these roles popping up, you see innovation departments popping up. And that, I think, is a good thing. It is a journey, however, and maybe we can unearth that a little bit as we talk about this further. But the definition of innovation is, to be quite honest, unique for different organizations. There is no one size fits all approach to innovation. I think at a high level; however, innovation does mean something new. The introduction of a new or a novel idea or a device or a methodology or a way of doing things. So, there are multiple ways to get at newness, the novelty of perhaps tackling something that could be done better, faster, perhaps even cheaper. That is the way I look at innovation. It is a trend that we're seeing in health systems, really embracing innovation in a much more focused way than just letting things happen.

As you look at innovation and at the application of technology, how do you see and how do you believe these concepts can be used to positively impact the human experience we provide in healthcare? Where can it help? What kind of difference can it make?

That's a great question, because positively impacting the human experience in healthcare is something that we need

to be thinking about intently. I believe wholeheartedly that innovation up to now and really healthcare transformation in general, has often been about taking care of the plumbing layer. By that I mean the integration points. We've turned a software solution on and we have maybe dozens of these or hundreds of these, maybe over a thousand of these, depending on how big the system is and how do we deal with the plumbing, those are things like data exchange, the challenges of interoperability, data harmonization needs, etc. The plumbing layer has taken up all of our efforts, and in many ways that's where we've been innovating, that's where we've been trying to "transform" healthcare with chief digital officers, chief transformation officers, chief innovation officers.

I think it is time for us to elevate ourselves above that. And not to say that interoperability isn't critically important. It's very, very important. But our focus shouldn't just be on the plumbing layer. Our focus really needs to be on the experiential layer. And I think when we start focusing in on that experiential layer, the way that we approach, for example, interoperability will change, and I think that's essentially the lens through which we need to really be making this level of progress as we look forward in how we continue to innovate in healthcare.

How can we address the challenges of technology being seen as an impediment versus a support in healthcare and innovation being applied purely because organizations feel they need to be addressing innovation for the sake of innovation?

I think wholeheartedly that those two things – [innovation and technology] – actually come together quite nicely [in addressing this challenge]. We must look at where it is that we embrace innovation as a methodology, innovation as a strategic imperative, innovation as a way to really move us forward at a much more rapid pace, because in reality healthcare is complex and healthcare is slow. I talk often about how startups are always in a hurry, and healthcare, however, is not. And the way we solve for that really is to bring together the best of the innovation methodologies that exist out there and marry that to the specifics of how technology can help us. This is well beyond moving from converting analog methodologies to digital methodologies, which is what we've been focused on in the last 10, 20, 30 years.

I think the approach we need is to say, "Alright, we need to strategically look at how innovation plays a role in addressing the most critical pain points in the delivery of care in our specific organizations, in the communities that we're specifically serving." And I draw emphasis on that because it's important for us to contextualize this to the mission of the organization, the specifics of the communities that you're serving, and not just get blinded by what everyone else is doing. We should not just all be

saying, "Let's do AI (artificial intelligence). Let's do blockchain," because our peers are doing it.

Now, there is nothing wrong with AI or blockchain. I think they're really great advancements that are being made in both of those areas that can be contextualized to the needs of an organization. But I think it's important to first and foremost understand what your pain points are because that's where you start bringing in focus. And without focus, innovation is just noise. And you don't think about it initially, but at the end of the day (innovation can) become another distraction, and I think it's time for us in the industry to get organized around innovation and how it aligns with strategy, because otherwise we're just going to get distracted. So, to address how we inoculate ourselves against the "Shiny Object Syndrome" as I call it, is something that is really important.

As you look at innovation and technology and you look to the future of healthcare, where do you see the potential of these concepts making the greatest contribution? Where can and should organizations be focusing their efforts?

I think it's important for organizations to understand why it is that they want to really embrace innovation and align it with strategy if it is what they want to do. As I said earlier, it shouldn't just be a me-too strategy, it should be very focused on who it is that they are. So a couple of things. A: I think it's important for this to be very intentional. B: I think it needs to be very focused, and C: it needs to have a sense of urgency. So, whether it already exists or whether you need to instill that sense of urgency in some creative ways, you've got to have that. With these three core components, then this thing that you need to do around addressing those pain points, bringing in the right champions, you're getting at this in a much more organized way than just letting it happen and this being just one more thing that the organization is doing. It will not have the level of impact you desire if you don't have that level of intentionality, focus, and sense of urgency.

And then to wrap it all together, with those three essential things, you need to understand the motivators around why it is that you're doing what it is that you're doing. For us at Atrium Health it is our mission, it is about serving. There was a big leadership development institute where our top leaders came together for a daylong event here in Charlotte. This is right about the time that I was joining the organization. I had the opportunity to meet and speak with all of them. A comment that I made on the stage actually resonated with all of the teammates and leaders. What I said was, "If serving is below you, then leadership is beyond you." That really is my challenge to leadership, that servant leadership methodology. It is one that in many ways is the essence of the entirety of the healthcare

industry and the pursuit of better health and care. It is about serving.

What advice do you have for leaders, practitioners that are looking to advance this conversation in their own organizations; about elevating the human experience and integrating innovation and technology into those efforts in a way that matters?

I'll encapsulate this into three words: faster, smarter, and together. I think it's important for us to move faster. I mean, we are slow industry, and a lot of the slowness goes back to the elements of how we need to approach medicine and the practice of medicine, which is evidence based and talking about best practices and bringing in the science and the evidence, the academia behind any decision that we make. And that's all well and good. And those things are there for a reason. That is about the science of medicine.

But when it comes to innovation, when it comes to transformation, when it comes to thinking through these challenges that we have and concepts such as the fail fast methodologies and human-design, it's a way that we [need to] go about doing things. We have to exercise those muscle sets so that we can actually train ourselves to go faster. And then smarter. I think that that's going to be really important as well to capitalize on the data that we have, the intelligence and knowledge that we can garner out of what those data are telling us.

I think in the past, you and I've had a conversation about blind spots as well and I had particularly talk about data blind spots, right? So, what is the data not telling you that you should really be digging for? So faster, smarter and then together. I think together is really important for us as well. And by together, I mean how do we make sure that we're able to work with patients, work with fellow clinicians, work with the right partners in the industry, and define the right methodologies for what that coming together really looks like? So, it's less about any one institution or organization or entity for that matter, but really if we can find what coming together really looks like to more rapidly move us faster in a smarter way, then I think we have all the right elements to really transform healthcare.

A leap worth taking

As Dr. Shrestha reinforces technology and innovation is not just a “thing” we should do in healthcare for the sake of doing. In fact, it is something that can add great strategic value in elevating our capacity to ensure the best in care for all we serve. Indeed, these ideas can help move a traditionally slow-moving industry forward with greater speed and intention. More importantly as Dr. Shrestha reinforces, if we apply these concepts and the opportunity they present to healthcare with the mindset of together, we have a true capacity to transform healthcare in ways we may have yet to imagine. That is a leap worth taking; one Dr. Shrestha encourages, and I concur we must now take with intention and purpose as we ensure the best in human experience for all in healthcare.