



The Innovation Learning Network Wants To Cure What Ails The Health Industry

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As anyone who has tried to navigate the maze of health care organizations in the U.S. knows, the industry at times is like one big headache--and not one that is at all patient-centered. This is not always the case with nonprofit health care systems like Kaiser Permanente and the Mayo Clinic, however, since they don't have to report to shareholders and can really think about what's best for their local communities rather than the bottom line. For these systems that have the luxury of experimenting with new ideas, there is the Innovation Learning Network.

We recently spoke with ILN director Chris McCarthy at Kaiser's Garfield Center, a 37,000-square-foot Hollywood-style mock hospital that is a testing ground for health care innovations--currently, for example, the center contains a mock NICU unit, a microclinic, and a VGo robot that is intended to cruise the floor and interact with patients. These are the kind of leaps forward--in technology, infrastructure design, and space design--that Kaiser shares with its ILN peers, who include Partners Healthcare, Frog Design, Point Forward, the Health Plan Alliance, and Veterans Affairs.

"It's for anyone in health care who is thinking about innovation," says McCarthy. "Our mission is to connect with innovators to understand design thinking, how to be a better storyteller and ethnographer, and also to identify interesting innovations and trade them."

The organization, which was founded in 2006, has already seen its partnerships pay off. A few years ago, Kaiser embarked on a project to make medication administration safer. Before the ILN, says McCarthy, Kaiser would have had to do its own desk research, ethnography, and

observation. Kaiser could have gotten the job done, but it would have taken a long time. "With the ILN, we just asked our friends, 'Would you be willing to share the best and worst of medication administration [in your experience]?,'" explains McCarthy.

Kaiser put everything it learned from its partners into KP MedRite, a medical administration program that has drastically reduced errors throughout the Kaiser health care system.

It sounds like a simple solution to our health care crisis--maybe, if the industry works together, patient-centered care can truly become a reality. But at the moment, the ILN only allows nonprofit health care systems into the network. Because, as mentioned earlier, nonprofits are mission-based and don't have to deal with shareholders who might not see the value in risky and potentially unprofitable experimentation. "We're getting pinged more and more by for-profit organizations to join. There has been a clamor since health care reform," says McCarthy.

To truly disrupt the health care industry, for-profits may have to start working together, whether with the ILN or a new innovation organization of their design. And maybe they could also take a hint from the Garfield Center to experiment with new ideas and not be afraid to fail for the sake of moving forward.

[Image: Ariel Schwartz]

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