

## **Google's Latest Health Care Ambitions**

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Near the end of 2018, Google hired Dr. David Feinburg from Geisinger Health and placed in charge of the newly created Google Health Division. Much has been left unsaid about the ambitions for this division since that time. However, events this past week have begun to shed some light on the potential scope and goals of this division; and Google's ambitions more broadly in relation to health care.

### **Google Health at the HLTH Conference**

Dr. Feinburg spoke about plans for Google Health openly on stage last week during a 15 minute presentation at HLTH, a health care conference in Las Vegas.<sup>1</sup> CNBC reported on the event, noting that Feinburg is "focusing his efforts on Google's core expertise in search, looking to make it easier for doctors to search medical records, and to improve the quality of health-related search results for consumers across Google and YouTube."<sup>2</sup>

Feinburg described some of the ideas for bringing Google's technology into health care. He suggested how doctors and nurses might utilize a search bar on the top of EHRs (electronic health record) to effectively help with some of the tedious data entry work. In essence, it would begin to make suggestions, automatically filling out responses and providing relevant information.

As for other Google services, Feinburg spoke of the use of YouTube by doctors for guidance on surgical procedures. He noted that the company is working to improve the quality of this content.

CNBC reported that Feinberg has also been "building bridges with the Google search and YouTube teams to improve health searches for consumers, so results are more authoritative, and to ensure there's less bad advice about health, such as videos that urge people to avoid vaccinating their children."<sup>3</sup>

So, while Feinburg reports directly to CEO Sundar Pichai, he also works with the company's other teams including search, YouTube, Google's cloud team and the Verily life-sciences company that's part of Alphabet (Google's parent company).

### **Google's Acquisition of Fitbit**

Separate from Dr. Feinburg's talk at the HLTH Conference, Google announced its plans to acquire Fitbit for \$2.1 billion. Given the broader context of Google's push into health care, much of the value in Fitbit for Google is in the information collected by these fitness trackers.

Fitbit collects data on its 28 million active users, ranging from steps and sleep to heart rates, running pace and options to log menstrual cycles. Smart scales can track weight, body mass index (BMI), and available apps allow for the tracking of food, blood sugar, routes taken, water intake, and goal setting of

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<sup>1</sup> "General Session: David Feinberg, Head of Google Health". HLTH YouTube Channel. Posted October 30, 2019. Available at: <https://youtu.be/21A1CdmFcwE>. Accessed on November 3, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Farr, Christina. "Google Health is finally opening up about its plans, and they're all about search". CNBC.com. Posted November 2, 2019. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/02/google-healths-david-feinberg-focus-on-search-for-doctors-consumers.html>. Accessed on November 2, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

various types. Companies offer “Fitbit Care” as a platform for employees that then links all of this data back to the workplace. Google is now set to obtain all of this data.

### **Going Forward**

The events of this past week have shed some light on Google’s developing health care strategy and broader health care ambitions.

The Google Health division has clarified an aim to ensure that content available to professionals and the public is more accurate and authoritative. Insofar as services are targeted at professionals, the backing of these efforts has been said not to be supported by advertisement revenues. And, in spite of some privacy breaches with health data with projects involving Google in the past, Google has tried to allay any concerns and make it clear that any personal information will not be sold to anyone.

Alphabet owns Verily; a company that creates “tools that put health data into action.” A recent article in Slate draws special attention to Verily as a vehicle for turning this data in to revenues:

*Right now [Verily] is working on developing smart lenses, surgical robots, and eating utensils for people with limited mobility, among many other things. Even when it partners with other companies and researchers (one project is tandem with pharmaceutical manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline, for example), Google will hold a lot of sway over how the data is distributed, what kinds of questions are asked, and to what end.*

*Surely a lot of helpful insights and products might come out of Alphabet’s health efforts. But to get those, we have to put our trust in a company whose main goal is not public health.<sup>4</sup>*

The picture is now slowly becoming clearer about how Google intends to target the \$3.5 trillion health care market. Data from the likes of Fitbit and a refinement of Google services to create more intelligent and authoritative tools and resources could put Google in a position to influence and generate revenues on a much greater scale from health care professionals, drug companies, insurance companies, and other players.

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<sup>4</sup> Palus, Shannon. “Google Plans to Acquire a Trove of Health Data in Fitbit”. Slate. November 1, 2019. Available at: <https://slate.com/technology/2019/11/google-plans-to-buy-fitbit-for-usd2-1-billion.html>. Accessed on November 2, 2019.