A Different Kind of Merger
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You never know when something important will just “fall out of the sky.” I had this experience while speaking at the St. Luke’s Health System retreat in Boise, ID, several months ago. During our lunch session, I had the privilege of sitting next to Jim Everett, President and CEO of the Treasure Valley Family YMCA in Boise. Jim has been on the board of St. Luke’s Health System for quite some time; he is also Co-Chair of the Idaho Business Coalition for Education Excellence—clearly a very civic-minded leader. It was Jim who shared with me the news before the issuance of the press release about the April 1, 2014, merger between Informed Medical Decisions Foundation (www.informedmedicaldecisions.org) in Boston, MA, and Healthwise (www.healthwise.org) in Boise, ID. I thought our readers of this journal would be interested to learn some of the “behind-the-scenes” details.

The Informed Medical Decisions Foundation is 25 years old; Healthwise is nearly 40 years old. Their missions are closely aligned, and they have both been valued leaders in the field of patient engagement. As the nation progresses down the road toward true system reform under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), patient engagement will become even more important. Hence, the merging of Informed Medical Decisions Foundation and Healthwise takes on national significance.

Why bring these 2 venerable organizations together? Why now? According to Donald W. Kemper, MPH, Founder and longtime CEO of Healthwise, “we have always valued the scientific rigor that they [the Informed Medical Decisions Foundation] have been able to put into their evidence reviews. While Healthwise has been highly responsive to changes in practice guidelines, the Foundation’s medical editors have been even closer to the core outcomes research.”1 In other words, although each organization pledges to remain free of any external funding, including support from the pharmaceutical industry, they believe that a merger would improve their core base, enabling them to continue to make the best possible and most unbiased information available to consumers throughout the marketplace.

Healthwise has been a policy player in the creation of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services “meaningful use” rules, which require the prescription of patients’ specific educational resources, and the Foundation is consistently boosting the focus of policy on shared decision-making, as evidenced in the ACA. In other words, both organizations have played a critical, although perhaps behind-the-scenes, role in sculpting the ACA. Together they may be even more influential than each organization alone.

Finally, again according to Mr Kemper, “people turn to Healthwise content over 180 million times every year for help with every health concern imaginable, and we’ve won ClearMark Award recognition by the Center for Plain Language 4 years running. The Foundation was particularly impressed with our technical integration with over a dozen EMR [electronic medical record] systems, which is now allowing 15% of US practicing physicians to prescribe Healthwise information to their patients.”

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What may be the goals for the future of this combined entity? First, the 2 boards have entered into a joint agreement (modeled, in part, after the Mayflower Compact) that defines their mission, vision, culture, and intent. The shared goal is to use their combined expertise to “help people make better health decisions.”2

How much progress have they made so far? Again, according to Kemper, the “product development teams from both organizations have combined under the Healthwise brand, and they are working hard on the next generation of patient decision aids. In addition, the policy advocacy staffs have combined under the brand of the Informed Medical Decisions Foundation to impact national policy, and, finally, the research team and the user experience team will remain somewhat at arm’s length so that the Foundation branded research outcomes will retain their well-deserved market credibility.”

I envision a world where nearly every primary care physician in the United States is able to offer his or her patients an information prescription, with links to patient-oriented materials that have passed the test of the
combined research staffs of Healthwise and Informed Medical Decisions Foundation.

Finally, the incoming Board of Directors of the combined entity gives me great confidence that this new organization will emerge as an even stronger player in the world of patient engagement. In addition to venerable thought leaders—such as Margaret “Peggy” E. O’Kane from the National Committee for Quality Assurance and Susan Edgman-Levitan, PA, from Massachusetts General Hospital—the Board of Directors also includes Daina Middleton, former CEO of Performics, the performance marketing agency of Publicis Groupe; Ruth Prince, the International Admissions Counselor at Boise State University (who has firsthand experience with healthcare systems overseas); and finally, Kristi Saucerman, Founder, President, and CEO of Auction Frogs, a leader in online fundraising for charitable organizations.

Be on the lookout for the Healthwise–Informed Medical Decisions Foundation. They will soon be coming to a physician’s office near you.

As usual, I am interested in your views and you can reach me at my e-mail, david.nash@jefferson.edu.

References
1. Private correspondence with Donald Kemper, April 21, 2014.