

January 22, 2015



From Idea to Innovation: A Way to Aid Breast Cancer Patients Is Born

By Tiffani Sherman

Innovation in medicine doesn't always have to come from medical students or physicians. The idea for a new program connecting newly diagnosed breast cancer patients with people in remission came from an insurance company lawyer.

Daniel Tedesco, a lawyer in Aetna's procurement department, had an idea to facilitate communication between parents of children with autism. "The original idea I submitted was essentially to create a matchmaking system so that Aetna members that we could identify as particularly successful in managing a health condition could become mentors and coaches to Aetna members who are newly diagnosed with the condition," Tedesco said.

Tedesco entered his idea into his company's annual Innovation Idea Incubation Challenge for employees. Out of more than 1,000 ideas, it won. "I was extremely surprised," Tedesco said. "I work among thought leaders in our industry, and the other contest finalists put forth some amazing ideas."

The contest is a way for the insurance company to ask its own people how they would improve health care and look for ideas from different perspectives. “We are always looking for the next great idea,” said Jess Jacobs, director of innovation at Innovation Labs at Aetna, based in Washington, D.C. “This idea is definitely one we never would have gotten without the innovator idea.”

The contest ended in March 2014 and soon discussions began about how to implement CarePal as a program. It’s a way for people with a particular medical condition to share their knowledge with someone who recently received a diagnosis. “Dan helped orchestrate many of the conversations across Aetna and helped design the program and the platform,” Jacobs said.

The focus changed as the idea evolved. “We were looking for a condition that would show some measurable results in a very short time,” Jacobs said. Autism is a slow-moving and life-long condition, and often data about the diagnosis, care and progress readily available to insurance companies like Aetna is not measurable. Much more data concerning outcomes exists for a disease like breast cancer. “You may start with one idea and realize you can make a more significant impact in another direction,” Jacobs said. “You have to challenge your idea.”

Soon, the people at the Innovation Labs at Aetna were working to put CarePal together. “It was some rapid innovation,” Jacobs said.

By October, it was in the pilot phase. “I’m proud because it demonstrates the flexibility of our organization to have an idea conceptualized, vetted, funded, developed and put into prototype form within months,” Tedesco said.

Aetna is using claims data to make the matches. “You have one person who is experienced with a condition and one who is new to the condition,” Jacobs said. “We can do the match with a little more specificity.”

The company plans to match potential CarePal participants based on specific diagnosis, family life, socioeconomic level, employment status, geography and more. The idea is for newly diagnosed patients to have someone to talk to who shares more than just a breast cancer diagnosis. “If you want outcomes to improve, having a personal connection is important,” Jacobs said.

Aetna has been reaching out to about 30,000 of its members who are qualified, asking them if they would like to participate in the program. “So far, we’ve seen pretty good response from the people with experiences,” Jacobs said. Response has not been as vibrant for the newly diagnosed. “We’re looking to expand our communications,” she said. “Getting someone at the beginning of an illness may be a little overwhelming.”

The enrollment process is proceeding and some matches are already communicating. “Not being alone is definitely what this is about,” Jacobs said.

Once a match is made, the exchanges are all private and are often happen via phone, email or text. Aetna does not see the communication. “We’re not asking people to give medical advice here, we’re asking them to share experiences,” Jacobs said. It could be about navigating benefits or other daily life challenges that have nothing to do with insurance.

The peer support can only help medical professionals, Jacobs said, adding that physicians are often in the same position as insurance companies. They can only tell instead of feel, because they often have not been through treatments themselves. “By having some kind of peer support, physicians can focus on the medical side,” she said.

Eventually, the CarePal program could expand, involving Aetna members with other diagnoses, maybe even including Tedesco’s original idea. “I’m excited that we are looking at the next step of bringing Aetna CarePal to parents of children with autism in 2015,” Tedesco said.

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