

Preface

Over the past decade a rapidly expanding body of literature has demonstrated the existence of healthcare disparities. While consensus has not emerged regarding the causes of disparities, they are generally thought to be related to provider, patient, and healthcare system factors. On the one hand, the current US healthcare system is oriented toward individualized acute care. Yet healthcare disparities by definition are a population level phenomenon. Individuals do not have disparities, groups and populations do. Thus population level data alone will not enable us to develop individualized interventions. Similarly, biologic, cellular, or molecular level data that is not informed by sociocultural realities has limited ability to help us craft the most appropriate interventions to address healthcare disparities. Rather knowledge from each of these levels of analysis must be sought, integrated, and evaluated. In so doing we will gain a far more relevant and informed understanding of healthcare disparities and have a better foundation from which to build clinical and behavioral interventions.

To develop the best interventions, several authorities have suggested the need for greater information technology research and investments. eHealth researchers may be able to make significant contributions in this area through research and its applications. Not surprisingly though, most individuals concerned about healthcare disparities have little knowledge of the fields of health information technologies or eHealth. Similarly, many working in the technology fields have only a cursory understanding of healthcare disparities. As such, the intent of this book is to draw together two unlikely bedfellows; the information technology fields and the sociobehavioral and population sciences, and to challenge readers to consider new possibilities and opportunities across the two disciplines.

In order to successfully accomplish this task the first section of this book contains several chapters discussing the field of healthcare disparities and current consensus on factors considered important in their causation. Because any serious consideration of computer technologies is not complete without a discussion of the role of the Internet, the second section of the book contains several chapters discussing the role of the Internet in society and emerging disparities in access and utilization of this technology. The third section of this book focuses on three computer- and technology-based themes most relevant to healthcare disparities, namely eHealth,

Medical Informatics, and Public Health Informatics. Finally, the last section of this book has several chapters pulling it all together. These chapters discuss future innovations in research that will be needed to foster a more informed and comprehensive understanding of healthcare disparities as well as policy opportunities for moving forward. The book ends with a chapter suggesting several ways in which technology may help us achieve the goal of reducing and eliminating healthcare disparities, some perhaps not previously considered. It is our hope that you find this book not only interesting, but also intellectually provocative to the point that you challenge old notions and conventions related to healthcare disparities and develop new technology-based collaborations to make the promise and the potential of technology strategies to address healthcare disparities, a reality.

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