Software Gets the World to Stop (Over)Eating

By André席斯密斯

In a world of wellness companies and cultivators of health fads, one must question whether there are any problems left to solve. And the tech investor Andreessen Horowitz (a16z) is ready to bet on that question.

"Real health care infrastructure is really broken," a16z General Partner Tony Xu said in an interview with Fintech Finance. "Healthcare services and payments are not aligned at all. It's a business that's not working, but we're willing to bet on it."

In the case of Omada Health, which recently raised $100 million in Series C funding to help people lose weight, the company is using software to help people manage the disease of obesity.

"It's a very deep problem," Xu added. "We're still far away from finding a cure, but we do think that technology can help."

The DPP

The Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) was a major multicenter clinical research study aimed at discovering whether modest weight loss through dietary changes and increased physical activity or treatment with the oral diabetes drug metformin could prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes in people at risk for the disease.

The DPP aimed to study participants who had prediabetes, a condition characterized by high blood glucose levels that are higher than normal but not high enough for a diagnosis of diabetes. Affecting one in three Americans, prediabetes will progress to type 2 diabetes within ten years. By 2010 the total bill from public and private health care expenditures constituted 10% of all health spending.

In other words, weight loss is a means to an end. Preventing or delaying diabetes is the goal, but the journey is important in its own right. And once a digital therapeutic works for one condition, it can be scaled to the world at large.

Thinking vertically in terms of application areas, we believe that the combination of science, software, design, and hardware is the fundamental technique for developing digital therapeutics that can be applied to many different chronic diseases.

But losing weight and getting in shape can be a daunting task, and this is where software comes into play. Prevent's program is a deceptively simple combination of a friendly app and one coach into an omnipresent virtual community focused on weight loss. And the best part? It's actually fun.

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The DPP found that participants who lost a modest amount of weight through dietary changes and increased physical activity or treatment with the oral diabetes drug metformin could prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes in people at risk for the disease.

"We know that weight loss is one of the most effective ways to prevent or delay diabetes," Xu said. "And we also know that it's not easy to do."

"And people want to lose weight," he added. "People want to lose weight but they don't have the time or the money to go to a gym. And they don't have the discipline to stick to a diet."

"So we're trying to create a product that makes it easy for people to lose weight," Xu said. "A product that doesn't require them to go to the gym or spend a lot of money."