

Ford plans to enter healthcare

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Ford researchers are busy developing glucose device connectivity and monitoring capabilities, location-based allergy and pollen reports, and voice-controlled cloud-based health management services. Why? Because the country's leading automaker is accelerating efforts to enter the mobile healthcare segment via its SYNC in-car connectivity system (now for hands-free control of music and phone calls).

At what may have been an historic press event (only time will tell) held last week at Ford's Research and Innovation Center in Dearborn, Ford execs were on hand to explain the reasons behind the efforts, show demos, and to discuss the future of in-car health monitoring, with the help of their medtech partners: Medtronic (continuous glucose monitor), SDI Health (informational asthma and allergy system), and WellDoc (mobile health integrated services).

Ford's Global Manager of Interiors, Infotainment and Health & Wellness Research Gary Strumolo told reporters "Ford wants to create cars that care." And Ford CTO Paul Mascarenas described the car as "the ultimate setting for health and wellness activities."

Ford's high-volume approach to bringing mobile health and wellness solutions inside its cars is initially targeted at diabetics and those with asthma and/or allergies.

According to the American Diabetes Association, nearly 26 million adults and children are currently living with diabetes, while the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America reports about 60 million Americans have asthma, allergies, or both.

For diabetics and their caregivers, constant knowledge and control of glucose levels is critical to avoiding hypoglycemia, which can cause confusion, lightheadedness, and blurry vision. And those with asthma and allergies need to have a clear understanding of pollen levels in the air that can quickly lead to an attack. Growing in popularity among this group are Web-based alert services and smartphone apps that help flag dangerous pollen levels based on location.

An overview of the technology involved includes a prototype system that connects SYNC, via Bluetooth, to a Medtronic (medtronic.com) continuous glucose monitoring in order to share glucose levels and trends through audio feedback and a visual display. The system will provide secondary alerts if levels are too low.

To help meet the mobile healthcare needs of drivers living with asthma and allergies, Ford is working with SDI Health (sdihealth.com) and www.pollen.com to SYNC-enable the smartphone Allergy Alert app, giving users voice-controlled access to the app that provides location-based day-by-day index levels for pollen; asthma, cold and cough and ultraviolet sensitivity; as well as four-day forecasts.

And WellDoc (welldocinc.com) has joined forces with Ford to integrate in-car accessibility to WellDoc's comprehensive cloud-based personalized solutions for those with asthma and diabetes through SYNC services. Using voice commands, SYNC users could access and update their WellDoc profile to receive real-time patient coaching, behavioral education and medication adherence support based on their historic and current disease information.

Ford's Strumolo told reporters that the car company is developing seats with embedded heart rate monitors to measure a driver's stress levels. Cars could use this stress-level information, along with the driver's activity (speed, switching lanes, etc.), to make decisions to help control the heart rate, such as whether incoming calls should be permitted or whether they should go to voice mail.

Meanwhile, insurance companies are taking note of developments that enable patients to better manage their health, according to WellDoc Chief Strategy and Commercial Officer Chris Bergstrom. Bergstrom says one of the "next big trends in health plans will be the Patient Centered Medical Home (PCMH)" that provide cash incentives to policy holders for achieving and maintaining acceptable BMI, cholesterol, and blood pressure levels, and other health factors. One of the leading insurers with such a program is BlueCross BlueShield Maryland with its CareFirst program. Bergstrom said WellDoc is an effective tool for meeting CareFirst goals.

As for when caring cars will be available for purchase, Strumolo said Ford is looking at possibly one to two years.

For more on Ford's medtech partners have to say, read the "Coming Soon: Cars that care" Perspectives blog at www.medicaldesign.com.