

In Prime Health

During a spree of acquisitions in mid-2022, online commerce giant Amazon inked a deal to purchase One Medical, a membership-based and technology-driven company providing primary care and preventative medical services to over 700,000 Americans, both digitally and in physical practice locations.¹ Of the acquisition, SVP of Amazon Health Services Neil Lindsay said:

“We think health care is high on the list of experiences that need reinvention. Booking an appointment, waiting weeks or even months to be seen, taking time off work, driving to a clinic, finding a parking spot, waiting in the waiting room then the exam room for what is too often a rushed few minutes with a doctor, then making another trip to a pharmacy—we see lots of opportunity to both improve the quality of the experience and give people back valuable time in their days.”

Some commentators celebrate Amazon’s foray into healthcare, arguing that Amazon’s signature approach to ease of use and efficiency could revolutionize the sector. “One area where Amazon undisputedly excels is its user interface...This ease and simplicity could extend to the healthcare realm, which, right now, is a rat’s maze,” said Caitlin Donovan, Senior Director of the National Patient Advocate Foundation.² Donovan also highlights the internet retailer’s propensity to negotiate bulk purchasing at rock-bottom prices—a welcome innovation amidst ballooning prescription drug costs in the United States.

Others have raised worries stemming from Amazon’s advertising and data privacy practices, which have seen their share of negative press in recent years. In a recent letter to the Federal Trade Commission, Missouri Senator Josh Hawley requested a probe of the One Medical acquisition deal because the deal “would provide Amazon with access to enormous tranches of patient data.” Although he granted that HIPAA and other privacy laws (which Amazon has assured press outlets they would emphasize) would head off the worst abuses, the Senator pointed out that “loopholes exist in every legal framework.”³ “Amazon’s takeover of One Medical is the latest shot in a terrifying new stage in the business model of the world’s largest corporations,” said Barry Lynn, the Executive Director of Open Markets Institute, an organization that advocates for stricter antitrust regulation.⁴ Still others are concerned for patient equity in a world where Amazon is a substantial player in primary care. Katherine Gergen-Barnett of the Department of Family Medicine at Boston Medical Center worries that investments in more traditional primary care practices will dwindle, widening the disparities between those who have access to the private primary care services provided by companies like Amazon and those who do not, putting at risk the health of those who are older or poorer compared to those with commercial insurance and access to companies like Amazon.⁵

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is Amazon’s entry into the healthcare sector any morally different than any other private company’s participation in that same sector? Why or why not?
2. Does a promise of increased health care access and a better user experience outweigh data privacy worries about Amazon’s business model? Why or why not?
3. Are there unique moral problems or pitfalls with a digital-first primary care model? What are they, if so?

¹ <https://investor.onemedical.com/news-releases/news-release-details/one-medical-announces-results-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2021>

² <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/amandagardner/amazon-healthcare-push-what-does-it-mean>

³ <https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/josh-hawley-asks-ftc-probe-amazon-one-medical-deal>

⁴ <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/amazon-buy-primary-health-care-provider-39b-87181767>

⁵ <https://www.statnews.com/2022/07/23/deal-between-amazon-and-one-medical-deal-has-massive-implications-for-the-future-of-primary-care/>

