

Institute for Applied Care Systems

Applied Review / Clinical Systems Brief

Why Clearer Clinical Communication Hasn't Improved Patient Understanding

A Drift-Based Reading of The Age of Drift

Author: R. Dev Patel, PhD

Affiliation: Institute for Applied Care Systems

Date: November 2025 · Boston, MA

Over the past decade, healthcare systems have invested heavily in clarity. Visit summaries are cleaner. Instructions are standardized. Patient portals are more accessible. Language has been simplified, templated, and optimized for compliance.

Yet patient understanding continues to decline.

Missed instructions, poor adherence, preventable readmissions, and patient distrust persist. Even in settings where information delivery is technically “better” than ever. Traditional explanations focus on health literacy, time pressure, or patient motivation. These factors matter, but they no longer explain the full pattern.

The Age of Drift by A. Jacobs offers a more accurate diagnosis. The problem is not informational clarity, but semantic fidelity.

The Modern Clinical Paradox

Patients today often leave encounters able to repeat instructions without understanding their sequence, priority, or meaning. They know what to do, but not when, why, or how it *fits* into the rest of their care.

This is not confusion in the classic sense. It is drift.

Jacobs' Drift Principle explains why: When systems compress information faster than fidelity can be preserved, meaning slips out of the interaction.

Clinical communication has been optimized for speed, liability reduction, and documentation completeness. Each optimization is defensible. Collectively, they create an environment where meaning becomes thin, procedural, and emotionally hollow.

Filter Fatigue in Care Settings

Healthcare now requires patients to filter continuously:

- Portal notifications
- Conflicting follow-up instructions
- Insurance disclaimers
- Auto-generated summaries
- Scripted empathy cues
- Redundant reminders across platforms

This produces filter fatigue, the exhaustion caused not by too much information, but by too many signals requiring interpretation.

Patients are not disengaged, but over-filtered. And when filtering load exceeds cognitive and emotional capacity, comprehension degrades even as clarity improves. This explains why patients often describe care encounters as “informative but not grounding.”

Synthetic Realness in Clinical Encounters

One of the book’s most important contributions is naming synthetic realness, interactions that are recognizable, polished, and technically correct, yet feel strangely unreal.

In healthcare, this appears as:

- Scripted empathy that feels performative
- Telehealth visits that are efficient but relationally thin
- Risk explanations that are accurate but unintegrated

Care begins to resemble a simulation of itself. Patients sense this immediately, even if they cannot articulate it. Trust erodes not because clinicians lack care, but because the interaction no longer feels inhabited.

Why UX Fixes Keep Failing

Most interventions attempt to solve these issues at the surface level:

- Better interfaces
- Clearer summaries
- More reminders
- More “patient-friendly” language

But as *The Age of Drift* makes clear, meaning is ecological. It emerges from stable, coherent environments and not from isolated messages. When the care environment fragments attention, compresses time, and multiplies signals, no amount of clarity can restore understanding.

Why This Book Matters for Healthcare Now

This work arrives at a critical moment. AI is accelerating documentation, summarization, and clinical decision support. These tools promise efficiency, but without fidelity safeguards, they risk deepening the very problems they aim to solve.

The Age of Drift reframes patient comprehension as an environmental outcome, not a patient trait. It explains why systems can improve on paper while care feels increasingly unreal to those inside it.

For clinicians, designers, and administrators, this book provides something rare: a language for failure that does not blame patients or practitioners.

Key Insights from *The Age of Drift*

“Optimization solves external problems while creating internal ones.”

“Nothing is wrong with you. Your environment has quietly changed.”

“When context collapses, meaning drifts.”

Citation

Jacobs, A. (2025). *The Age of Drift: Why Modern Life Feels Fake — and What Reality Drift Reveals About the Modern Mind*.

ISBN: 979-8370811912

Amazon: <https://a.co/d/5eav73Y>

Substack: <https://therealitydrift.substack.com/>