Despite the United States now living in an era of improved health insurance coverage, care is not equally distributed across all social, economic, and racial groups. Dr. Kevin Fiscella has dedicated his career to understanding why some groups benefit more than others from the availability of health care—and critically, how to reduce or eliminate that disparity.

One of Dr. Fiscella’s more groundbreaking areas of research is looking at how to combat HIV using something as simple as an iPhone or iPod equipped with an interactive personal health record. Dr. Fiscella is using a community-based participatory research approach in which a team of patients, clinicians and community organizations are active partners throughout the research process. The team is investigating “activation training,” which simply means giving an HIV patient the knowledge, skills, confidence, and electronic tools to become full partners in their own care.

“The program coaches patients on ways to be prepared for a doctor’s visit, such as carefully noting the treatment concerns they have that might be forgotten in a conversation with the physician,” said Dr. Fiscella. “The program also allows the patient to access, understand, and manage his/her health care data, prompting them to take a more active role in their health.” Patients receive peer-based, group training over six weeks in how to use this technology. The program also educates health care providers on how to facilitate this empowerment, so a patient is actively involved in treatment both at home and at the doctor’s office, shoring up the cracks that lower-income patients often slip into.

Dr. Fiscella’s team—including his research partners from the Clinical Directors Network in New York City—expect to show that patients who receive this level of support will improve their ability to use technology to effectively manage their health, adhere to a medication regimen, and enhance their care quality—regardless of race, ethnicity, or education.

“My research would not be possible if not for the intellectually rich and exceptionally collaborative environment that exists at University of Rochester Medical Center,” says Dr. Fiscella. His work recently earned him an appointment to a Dean’s Professorship, the highest honor a dean can directly bestow upon a faculty member.