



# DIGITAL practice

*Innovative health tech products developed by women, for women are changing the way we look after our wellbeing*

BY ANGELA TUFVERSSON

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Imagine this: you're struggling to get pregnant but instead of peeing on a stick or taking your temperature at exactly the same time every day, you slip on a bracelet before you go to bed. While you sleep, its sensors measure key physiological areas to figure out your fertile window.

Or this: You're one of the 17% of New Zealand women affected by incontinence – perhaps you've recently had a baby or gone through menopause – but you're not sure how to perform pelvic floor exercises or whether you're squeezing the right spot. You insert a small gadget in much the same way as a tampon. It's linked to an app that guides you through the exercises – the stronger you squeeze, the higher the ball on the app rises.

This is 'femtech' – or female technology – and it's very much a reality. Covering everything from reproductive health and perinatal care to pelvic floor health and sexual wellness, femtech is all about using technology to find solutions to female health problems. It's a global phenomenon

– estimated to be worth a whopping \$75 billion by 2025 – with the potential to benefit the everyday lives of Kiwi women.

## INNOVATE AND EMPOWER

The digital health market exploded about 10 years ago, and in 2014 technology behemoth Apple released HealthKit, a 'comprehensive' health-tracking app that promised to help users monitor key metrics – diet, exercise, sleep and mindfulness – and niche areas like blood alcohol level and inhaler use. The trouble was that the app failed to track a key data set relevant to half the people on the planet: the menstrual cycle. After a backlash, later versions of the app included period tracking. It's this sort of mentality that prompted start-ups and entrepreneurs to

launch a raft of new apps and gadgets that help women take charge of their health in innovative, empowering and affordable new ways.

Lea von Bidder is one of the co-founders of the Swiss company that

developed Ava, a fertility and pregnancy tracking bracelet. She says even though technology is making our lives easier than ever before, it's often stuck in the 1970s when it comes to women.

"We're doing everything with our phone, we have so much technology everywhere and it really seemed like cycle tracking was stuck in the last century," she says. "That's how a lot of women's health products still feel today – they're all quite antiquated, imprecise and very inconvenient."

Trying to get pregnant can be stressful and all-consuming, and Lea says the company developed Ava to make cycle tracking convenient and non-invasive. "We just decided that we were going to look for something better," she explains. "You don't want to pee on sticks three times a day when you work in an office eight hours a day. You don't want to get up every morning at the same time to take your temperature – and when you forget it once, it's imprecise. We really wanted to bring women something that is just way, way more convenient and fits into their life."

And there's more to it than convenience – many femtech products are backed by science. A 2017 study in *Scientific Reports* found Ava identifies an average of 5.3 fertile days per cycle with an accuracy of 89%. Likewise, Elvie Trainer, the >>

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pelvic floor training gadget and app, also has clinical support. The device – which retails at \$329 – was recently made available on the NHS in the UK at no cost. "Giving women real-time biofeedback is shown to be the most reliable way to encourage commitment to pelvic floor training," says founder and CEO Tania Boler. "Women's health issues have been overlooked for far too long, particularly when it comes to tech innovation. Femtech is helping women understand their bodies more. Every development is encouraging women to talk about their bodies and intimate health more openly."

### A QUESTION OF TIMING

Why has it taken so long for the business and tech worlds to discover the lucrative women's health market? The simple answer is that it took a few players entering the market for everyone else to wake up to the potential of femtech products. A more complex answer examines the rise of female empowerment. The #metoo movement, pay parity campaigns and an increase in the number of female entrepreneurs have increased the profile of women's rights and gender equality.

"Femtech is one of the fastest growing sectors within the tech industry, with period and fertility trackers being one of the largest categories within health apps," says Ida Tin, CEO and co-founder of period tracking app Clue, who is credited with coining the term 'femtech'.

"When it comes to the future, investing in, and building, female-led, female-focused tech isn't just a step towards gender equality; it makes business sense. Women are also becoming more empowered across all industries and not just femtech. This empowerment is growing continuously, as women fight for their voices to be heard and their ideas and concepts to be taken seriously by everyone around them."

Reenita Das, a partner at business consulting firm Frost & Sullivan, says the reasons for the rise of femtech are threefold. "You have the gender gap and the number of women in senior leadership positions – there's a huge gender gap there," she says. "Then you have the huge discrepancy in salaries. And then there's a



third gap that people don't really talk about, which is called the pleasure gap, where women's needs for sexual pleasure have not taken a front seat. Everything is always focused on men's products and not on women. It's the awakening of all of these things that have taken the femtech industry by storm."

This is especially apparent in the rise of apps and devices that enhance sexual wellbeing like the Lioness smartphone vibrator, which syncs with an app to track experimentation and pleasure. "The idea of sexual pleasure for women was one that was not really seen as appropriate – it was seen as something to feel guilty about," says Dr Gill Greer, chief executive of the National Council of Women of New Zealand and a former executive director at Family Planning New Zealand. "If it's mutual and both parties are willing, then it should be a source of pleasure. What

we're seeing with start-ups and others exploring this market is, for example, sex toys, which can be used alone or with others, moving away from something to be ashamed of to something that is used for pleasure."

### IN PARTNERSHIP

Of course, even if they're medically sound, femtech products are no substitute for a visit to the doctor. Indeed, Lea says Ava should be used alongside traditional medical care. "We really see ourselves as going hand-in-hand with the care that a woman already receives from her doctor," she says. "Ava just offers women a huge data set that they can take to their medical professional. It provides a really good overview of your past cycles and when you had intercourse, and that's a really good basis for a doctor to understand what has happened in the past couple of months."

### TECH OF THE FUTURE

Looking to the future, Reenita says the femtech industry will continue to grow and expand into new areas. "This is a huge market and we're just at the tip of the iceberg," she says. "Right now, we're looking at four big segments in this market: reproductive health, pregnancy and nursing care, pelvic and uterine healthcare, and general healthcare and wellness. This fourth segment, general healthcare and wellness, has huge opportunities in terms of mental health, nutrition, fitness, diagnostic tests and screening."

Menopause is on the radar for Clue, and Lea says Ava is also looking at ways technology can help women navigate the change of life. "I'm absolutely sure that we will have solutions on menopause in the future – it's a huge, huge problem and that makes it a huge market," she says.

Ultimately, as with all things women's liberation, Tania says, "We'll know we've made real progress when we drop the 'fem' from femtech." \*



### Fabulous femtech

- Moment Health connects new mums with tools and knowledge to manage postnatal depression and other mental health issues.
- Fitbit Versa tracks periods and gauges ovulation alongside sleep and exercise.
- Willow is a wearable breast pump that tracks milk volume through an app.
- Leaf Urban looks like a stylish leaf-shaped pendant and tracks sleep, stress and reproductive health, and also offers meditation exercises.