

Great Canadian Healthcare Debate

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ISSUE BRIEF

A. Electronic health records

Resolved, that all governments, along with professional health-related colleges and associations, commit to building and using an electronic health record for every citizen and ensure that patients have access to all electronic health information held about them, with a view to ensuring full online access to data by patients within five years.

Sponsor: Sharon Nettleton, Patients for Patient Safety Canada

ISSUE

Digitization of the core elements of electronic health records is now complete or well underway across the country and adoption of digital health at the point of care is rising. However, most Canadian clinicians still work in paper or mixed paper/electronic environments, which creates challenges for delivering care that is safe, high quality, person-centred and efficient. There is also a substantial gap between patient desire for online access to their personal health information and services and what is currently available to them.

BACKGROUND

Broad support: Individual Canadians, health care providers, and governments strongly support electronic health records. For example, almost all adults surveyed say that it is important that their health records be kept electronically. The Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Nursing Association, and the Canadian Pharmacists Association have all made public statements supportive of the effective use of digital health. And provincial/territorial Ministers recently stated that “electronic health records are one of the most transformational innovations in health care in a generation.”

Current status – health care providers: All jurisdictions have completed digitization of several of the six core elements of electronic health records, such as laboratory tests, imaging, and medication lists; some have completed all components. Use of point of care solutions is also rising. For instance, 77% of Canadian family physicians reported using electronic medical records in 2014. Although still behind leading countries that have rates of 95%+, it is a significant gain from the 24% in 2007. Nevertheless, while the number of Canadian clinicians who use fully paper records is falling (the latest surveys estimate 21% of physicians, 25% of nurses, and 5% of community pharmacists), less than half work in fully electronic settings (29%, 20%, and 9% respectively).

Current status – patients/citizens: In 1992, the Supreme Court of Canada confirmed the right of patients to be able to access their personal health information, with very few exceptions. While over 8 in 10 Canadians want access to their health records and other patient online services, fewer than 1 in 10 can currently do so. That said, online access to laboratory test results is currently available in British Columbia. Local/regional initiatives in a number of other parts of the country are providing online access to health records for patients. Several jurisdictions are also preparing to launch initiatives that will deliver province-wide access for citizens to part or all of their electronic health records.

CONSIDERATIONS

International comparisons: While Canada leads globally in some areas of digital health (e.g. telehealth) and is catching up in primary care use of electronic medical records, we lag in others. These include use of advanced clinical information systems in hospital to support patient safety and patient online services. For instance, 11% of Canadian primary care physicians said that their practice allowed patients to email about a medical question in 2012, compared with 45% in Germany, 46% in the Netherlands, and 68% in Switzerland.

Potential benefits – clinical use: Effective use of electronic health records delivers significant access, quality, and productivity benefits. For example, 65% of physicians using e-records say that quality of care has improved since implementation. Independent studies have valued access, quality, and productivity benefits from the use of digital imaging, drug information systems, electronic medical records in community practices, and telehealth at \$13 billion since 2007. These benefits could rise significantly as use increases and matures.

Potential benefits – patients online: Experiences of early adopters suggest that appropriate use of patient online services has the potential to improve access to care, safety, patient empowerment and convenience, and outcomes for chronic diseases. Based on patient surveys, the Conference Board of Canada has estimated that almost 47 million in-person visits to clinicians could have been avoided in 2011 if Canadians had had access to information and tools to connect with their health care providers.

What is needed to progress: While some technical challenges persist, the experience in Canada and elsewhere suggests that progress is not all – or even mostly – about technology. It's about change, including change to the ways that patients interact with the health system, to clinical workflows, and to who does what. To optimize the benefits, digital health must be supported by a clear vision for benefits realization, sound governance and legislation, engagement and alignment of key stakeholders,



appropriate policy and practice change, necessary financial and other resources, and other enablers to transformation.

Thoughtful approaches: Implementation of electronic health records must be done responsibly, taking into account costs and benefits and building in appropriate privacy and safety protections. This is one reason for collective action in the timeframes proposed by the resolution. History shows that coordination can deliver better solutions through sharing of best practices, significant savings through joint procurement, and speedier progress through policy and practice alignment.

Why now? Surveys of the general public also suggest that the credibility of the health system is on the line – a failure to advance will be seen as a failure to deliver on the promise of a modern, sustainable health system that provides high quality care. Canadians want and deserve better in the health system, just as they are seeing the benefits of e-solutions in other aspects of their lives. Speedy progress is also important because there are potential risks in hybrid paper/electronic environments, the world in which many of Canada’s clinicians currently practice. In addition, recent progress – particularly in primary care adoption of electronic medical records, telehealth, and mobile and wearable devices – has also created significant momentum that can be built on. Likewise, digital records created initially for clinical use can be leveraged to more quickly provide online access to patients.

NEXT STEPS

- HealthCareCAN and the Canadian College of Health Leaders publicize Canada’s health leaders’ endorsement of the need to expeditiously advance effective use of digital health services, including patients’/citizens’ ability to access their own health information online.
- Encourage all relevant stakeholders – such as patient/citizen organizations, clinical associations and regulators, health care organizations and leaders, governments, provincial eHealth agencies, and Canada Health Infoway – to progress the goals of this resolution.
- Encourage awareness, discussion, and engagement of all major stakeholders of the benefits and challenges in moving this essential initiative forward and an understanding and accountability of the timelines.

REFERENCES

[Canada Health Infoway Annual Report](#), 2013/14

Commonwealth Fund [International Survey of Primary Care Doctors](#), 2012

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