

eHealth Ontario: Changing the way patients receive care across Ontario

By Heather Brown

In September 2008 eHealth Ontario was established to play a leading role in harnessing information technology and innovation to improve patient care, safety and access, to move the government's ehealth agenda forward.

After embracing a number of prudent improvements in its procurement practices and its public accountability, eHealth Ontario has continued to forge ahead in enhancing Ontario's health-care system and ensuring its sustainability for future generations. In addition to making changes to its procurement practices to make them competitive and transparent, eHealth Ontario has also achieved many significant milestones over the past year.

Diabetes has been recognized as a major threat to the health of nearly a million Ontarians and to the sustainability of our health-care system. With its health system partners and with the support of the Ontario Government, eHealth Ontario has responded with the Baseline Diabetes Dataset Initiative (known as BDDI). eHealth Ontario identified that there are currently 906,577 patients living with diabetes. BDDI matched these patients with the nearly 9,000 family physicians providing them with care. This is the first time that Ontario has been able to identify people living with diabetes with any degree of accuracy. BDDI is an innovative demonstration of the power

of linking data from various health information systems to determine how many of the patients received the three most common tests to monitor diabetes: the A1C blood sugar level test, LDL cholesterol test and retinal eye exam.

"These results, obtained through the Baseline Diabetes Dataset Initiative, show that just one in three Ontarians with diabetes are getting cholesterol and blood sugar levels tested and eyes examined at regular intervals as recommended by the Canadian Diabetes Association guidelines," says Michael Fenn, Interim President and CEO of eHealth Ontario. "Knowing the number of Ontarians living with diabetes – and the test and exams they are receiving or not receiving – will assist physicians to provide improved care to their patients. It's a crucial step in improving the treatment of chronic disease in Ontario."

Patients, their families, physicians and nurses, and indeed all Ontarians can see the potential value of using electronic medical records to improve the quality and efficiency of health-care delivery. For this reason, eHealth Ontario also partnered with OntarioMD, a subsidiary of the Ontario Medical Association, to increase the number of physicians who use electronic medical records (EMRs). By 2012, nearly 10 million Ontarians served by 9,000 physicians – representing nearly two-thirds of our primary care doctors, will be using electronic medical records, thanks in large part to programs

supported by eHealth Ontario and OntarioMD.

eHealth Ontario and the OMA collaborated to deliver the first successful EMR funding program for Ontario physicians – the Physician IT Funding Program. The Physician IT Funding Program ran from 2005 to 2008 and funded EMR systems for over 3,000 primary care physicians. They have recently launched a new EMR Adoption Program to offer assistance for EMR adoption to another 5,700 physicians over the next three years.

"There is pent-up demand for this program," says Dr. Suzanne Strasberg, President of the Ontario Medical Association. "Ensuring that electronic medical records are available in every doctor's office is an important step towards improving and strengthening Ontario's health-care system."

Physicians are using EMRs to prevent adverse drug reactions when writing and renewing prescriptions, manage lab results, and help develop preventive care strategies for their patients. EMRs allow doctors to readily access their patient's history, know what tests have been done and when to schedule periodic checks and tests. Physicians also use EMRs to help their patients manage chronic disease, such as diabetes and depression. When physicians have access to EMRs, patients can be confident that their information will be available when their physician or someone on his or her team needs it.

The value of electronic medical records (EMRs) proved themselves this year to those physicians who led their adoption. EMRs played a significant role during the recent H1N1 outbreak in Ontario. With the click of a button, physicians were able to identify their high risk patients and notify them that they were eligible to receive their H1N1 and seasonal flu shots, something that would have been virtually

impossible to do with paper charts.

Prescription drugs are a key ingredient in health care and electronic applications pioneered by eHealth Ontario and its partners have paved the way for better and safer use of drugs by patients. Patients at the Group Health Centre in Sault Ste. Marie and the Georgian Bay Family Health Team in Collingwood have benefitted from an innovative ePrescribing pilot program that eHealth Ontario launched this past spring.

The first of its kind in Canada, this ePrescribing program is an integral part of eHealth Ontario's Medication Management strategy. It eliminates the need for paper prescriptions and provides access to patient medication histories. The ePrescribing pilot, which has been extended for another six months, is supporting reductions in adverse drug events and unnecessary hospitalization for 80,000 patients associated with the two pilot sites.

Aided by technological integration, better, faster diagnoses can contribute to better health outcomes for patients. eHealth Ontario has succeeded in linking all 148 hospitals in Ontario where diagnostic images, such as x-rays, CT scans and MRIs are produced. Doctors will be able to review, diagnose and report on diagnostic imaging tests from anywhere within the diagnostic imaging repository system, eliminating the need for x-ray films or CDs of patients' tests being sent by courier between practitioners, provided they are connected to the repository.

Are Ontario taxpayers seeing other good results for their investments? Consider the case of those with serious head injuries. Over 100 times in 2009, ehealth technology avoided unnecessary transfers of patients with severe head trauma to another facility. Through the Emergency Neurosurgery Image Transfer System (ENITS), neurosur-

geons can remotely review head trauma images to make critical decisions about patients in local emergency rooms – saving lives, lessening family distress and avoiding costly transfers. The system is enabled by eHealth Ontario's secure network which ensures patient information is protected and the large image sizes can be transferred quickly.

These are some concrete examples of how ehealth initiatives are transforming patient care across the province. And there's much more progress right around the corner. "eHealth Ontario is committed to maintaining its strong partnerships with its stakeholders and delivery partners, and to continuing to use the power of technology for better health care for Ontarians," says Michael Fenn.

Heather Brown is a Communications Advisor with eHealth Ontario.

Leaning toward the future

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In November, Southlake hosted a Lean workshop for health-care professionals who work throughout the GTA and Central Ontario. The intent was to share its early successes and educate others on the principles of Lean, how to identify waste associated with the daily operations of a hospital and how to streamline its processes in order to provide patients with the best possible care.

Southlake has established itself as a leader in implementing the Lean process, but the work is not done yet. "Thinking Lean does not stop once we have implemented a few initiatives," says Carriere. "Given that we are situated in a high growth area which impacts our resources dramatically, and that our catchment population is aging at a rate well above the provincial average, we need to take advantage of every conceivable opportunity to continuously improve the way we deliver care."

Jesse Gray works in Corporate Communications at Southlake Regional Health Centre.

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