

### Increasing Electronic Access for Primary-care Patients

While computers are revolutionizing many aspects of our lives, most Canadians are finding it harder to access their primary care provider and get useful health information than they did 50 years ago. These issues are more than an inconvenience. At a time when providers are focused on helping people to manage their health and become partners in their own care, denying them electronic access to information and appointments are serious barriers to health.

Giving patients electronic access to their own health information can, for example, help people with diabetes manage their blood sugar or warn those with high blood pressure when they are moving toward risk of a stroke. In addition, according to Canada Health Infoway, improved patient safety and quality of care were responsible for most of the \$436 million the health system saved (as of March 2010) by having about 50 per cent of primary care physicians use electronic prescribing tools.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these benefits, Canada is not very good at giving patients electronic access to health information and services.

According to a 2012 Commonwealth Fund survey, Canada ranked last out of 11 countries on electronic patient access. Only one in 10 our primary care practices offer clients e-mail communication, just 7 per cent online appointment requests or referrals and a mere 6 per cent online prescription renewals.<sup>2</sup> Giving patients the ability to check test results or review their own medical records is virtually unheard of. CNA thinks denying electronic access is a clear case of failing to *care ahead*.

*Caring ahead* is a guiding catchphrase created by CNA to help establish a more organized approach to health care. In business and in life, we all know the value of planning ahead. Anticipating events, considering actions and options, and getting prepared make us much more likely to succeed. But when it comes to health care, we don't do it enough. In advocating for *caring ahead* CNA wants to instil the benefits of planning in the health system so we can solve problems before they become overwhelming.

So far in Canada, health-care information technology has focused on providers, not patients. For instance, British Columbia is integrating physician office records with provincial data sources. Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick have connected the electronic records of several patients to a provincial information infrastructure, and Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec have connected lab results to patient records. In Ontario, more than 400,000 reports are sent to primary care providers each month.<sup>3</sup>

These models speed up the transfer of information, but they do nothing to improve patient access. Although some efforts to change this situation are beginning to emerge,<sup>4</sup> the lack of electronic access is making it harder for patients to be part of *caring ahead*.

What is the next step in *caring ahead* on electronic access for Canadians?

1. The public, providers and governments could work together to develop standards for electronic access. At minimum, people could exchange information with their providers, check their records and the results of tests, book appointments and get prescriptions and referrals online.

---

<sup>1</sup> Canada Health Infoway. (2013). Benefits realization. Retrieved from <https://www.infoway-inforoute.ca/index.php/progress-in-canada/benefits-realization#DIS>

<sup>2</sup> Schoen, C., & Osborn, R. (2012). *The Commonwealth Fund 2012 international health policy survey of primary care physicians*. Retrieved from

[http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Publications/In%20the%20Literature/2012/Nov/PDF\\_2012\\_IHP\\_survey\\_chartpack.pdf](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Publications/In%20the%20Literature/2012/Nov/PDF_2012_IHP_survey_chartpack.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> E-Health Ontario. (2014). Electronic reports enhancing health care. Retrieved from <http://www.ehealthontario.on.ca/en/success-stories/view/electronic-reports-enhancing-health-care>

<sup>4</sup> Alberta has launched a personal health record, but it is a self-serve information portal and is not yet personalized. Cancer Care Ontario has gone further, giving patients access to programs designed to improve coordination of care. They include online access to referrals and appointments and the ability to invite friends and family to follow the patient and see all the information on the patient and providers. Across the country, some private companies offer scheduling and test results online, at times directly to patients (in the case of testing labs).