



FutureThink

Health Information Technologies: A Catalyst for Change

By Dr. W. J. Keon

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All Canadians have a stake in health information and the use of new technologies. Advancements and adoptions in this area will come in an evolutionary mode and bring with it enormous potential for empowering the consumer, creating information resources to improve accountability, and strengthening and integrating the continuum of healthcare services.

The use of the electronic patient-health record, computer-based decision-support tools, and the health-information networks, hospital information systems all linked through telemedicine and a plethora of communication systems are working their way into every facet of the health system. Without even knowing it, implementation of these technologies is changing the traditional ways of doing things and dramatically effecting the cost, quality and accessibility of healthcare. This somewhat invisible force will be the major catalyst for removing the barriers that stand between the various providers and organizations at the present time, including primary care, specialist physicians, hospitals, labs, long-term care facilities, policy makers, and ultimately, the patient and the healthcare system itself.

Perhaps, unwittingly, we have come upon the key that will unlock the door to integration of our health system on a national basis. This is not to suggest that it will be easy to procure the basic equipment in all locations necessary to link all parts of the required network. The economic burden borne by such a system as it effects physician offices, laboratories, hospitals and the patients themselves will be substantial and will be shared by all components to a greater or lesser degree.

Nonetheless, the rapid evolution of technology will dramatically change the way we do things and our need for healthcare facilities and systems. It is now possible to transmit large bits of

information from inside the body through networks to virtually any location on the globe. This will allow for management of patients without traditional office and clinic visits. Portable devices and sensors, allowing for the remote clinical monitoring of patient situations are now on the horizon. This will dramatically effect out-patient and clinic activities with needs for different types of personnel and facilities.

Wayne Gretzky has attributed his success in hockey in the fact that he “skates to where the puck will be.” As we collectively skate to where the puck will be in healthcare, all levels of government will have to assume a collective leadership role for cooperation and collaboration in promoting the broad use of new health technologies. This will require a level of cooperation between federal, provincial, regional and local authorities heretofore unseen. We must renew and fortify our belief in health information and technology as a fundamental pillar of our healthcare system. It will require a common effort and a clear recognition that no group or institution can do it all. We owe this commitment to ourselves, to each other and to future generations. **□**



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