

Health care in Canada: Time to Reboot

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In recent years Canada's doctors, nurses, pharmacists and health system leaders across the continuum of care have redoubled their efforts to shake off our nation's status as a laggard in the use of information technology in the service of patients.

Doctors are doing their part by stepping up efforts to bring electronic medical records into their practices.

Nurses are working to expand the 24-hour telehealth information and advice services provided by registered nurses across Canada.

Pharmacists are building and refining the use of information technology to help seniors and others track and manage their prescriptions. Drug information systems also allow for electronic prescribing, access to information for drug therapy monitoring, and enhanced collaboration with physicians and other prescribers. As advances in pharmaceutical therapies progress, these efforts will be increasingly important to optimize medication safety and effectiveness, as more and more Canadians will have to manage multiple prescriptions.

In hospitals and health care institutions, health system leaders are improving information exchange programs to ensure accessibility, patient safety, quality of care and the use of appropriate services in the right setting. These systems will enhance collaborative efforts and contribute to the collection of vital surveillance data to inform public health decisions locally, regionally and nationally in the case of a health situation such as the H1N1 pandemic.

Combined, the efforts of those on health care's front lines translate into tangible improvements in the organization, safety and effectiveness of the care provided to patients.

In the economic stimulus package announced last January, the federal government pledged an additional \$500 million to bring electronic health records to patients across the country. As the voice representing those who work in and lead the system, we were very encouraged to see this commitment.

Make no mistake, this funding and its focus on front-line care would mean improved care delivery to Canadians. This announcement also signalled that our federal government understood the value of investing in information technology and that our system needed to step out of the dark ages and into the technology era. Above all, it showed that our government understood that improvements in patient care and safety would be the critical returns on this investment.

It is now September and the funding has yet to be released. We took the government at

its word, as did our patients. We were told first by the Minister of Finance in January and then by the Minister of Health in February that these investments would be made. We are still waiting and, most important, Canadian patients are still waiting.

Canada is among the most tech-savvy and connected countries in the world, except when it comes to health care. The federal government must step up now and deliver the funding it promised to help correct this situation.

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