

# CANADIAN Healthcare Technology

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## New Brunswick on the way to a shareable electronic health record

BY GARY FOLKER

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to witness firsthand the benefits of technology developed to connect silos of critical health data in order to make it immediately accessible to those who provide care. More recently, the manifestation of this mission is the electronic health record, or EHR, and while there are many noteworthy efforts underway to deploy compelling EHR solutions, one of the most advanced examples I've encountered thus far is taking place in New Brunswick.

A bilingual province, New Brunswick is home to 740,000 people, including 1,232 practicing physicians. A population that is almost equally split between urban and rural residents is served by 51 healthcare facilities operated by two regional health authorities.

Initiated in 2007, the New Brunswick EHR project sought to respond to the demand for more immediate and convenient access to critical healthcare data, particularly patient information. By breaking down the silos in which healthcare data tends to get stranded and moving toward a 'one patient – one record' scenario, specific project goals included rapid access to specialist consultation, diagnostic imaging services and laboratory results.

I recently caught up with Cheryl Hansen, who is leading the effort for the provincial government, to learn more

about the status of the New Brunswick EHR solution. Although she describes the current state of the project "the beginning of a journey," I think what she's accomplished already is impressive. The client registry portion of it, which enables unique identification for all individuals, has been operational for two years. The diagnostic imaging repository is now live and integrated with the client repository to offer a longitudinal view of all images. The first targeted group of users – approximately 400 specialists and related nurses – has completed training, and more clinicians will be trained in the fall.

Perhaps the most immediate benefit of the work Hansen and her team have completed thus far is that physicians are able to access critical information about their patients more quickly and conveniently than before. After experiencing the solution in action – the EHR provided him instant access to information about the status of one of his patients – one physician went out of his way to thank Hansen and her team, writing: "It was great to be able to obtain this information so efficiently. I am now benefiting from our hard work over the past three years."

One of the places where the potential

impact of a province-wide EHR solution is felt most acutely is at the Stan Cassidy Centre for Rehabilitation (SCCR), which provides tertiary rehabilitation care across the province to patients with complex physical and neurological impairments. Following the provincial roll out of the EHR solution, SCCR deployed a patient portal that leverages the web – with security as a top priority – to improve communications between patients and their provider care teams.

Those teams – called circles of care – consist of family members and professionals with specialties ranging from childhood education to neurosurgery. Launched in January, there are currently more than 100 individuals using the portal. Ron Harris, administrative director at SCCR, expects that number to double soon and, eventually, for all of SCCR patients to have the option of participating.

Feedback on the portal was recently gathered by an independent evaluator, who received input from approximately 40 individuals representing different demographics and roles. "Things are working quite well and we're very pleased," Harris said. "People were very positive about how the portal closes the gap between rehabilitation professionals and patients at the speed of light. Also, communications within the circles of care have been expedited."

One way that communications can be expedited is by using the portal's video-conferencing capabilities for meetings



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with patients for whom travel is a challenge. "For someone living in the north-east of the province who has Lou Gehrig's disease, being able to meet with a physician without a fatiguing journey is very valuable," Harris said. In the future he expects the portal to be further enhanced with wireless technology.

In addition to closer contact with rehabilitation professionals, participants called out the portal's multi-media resource library as a benefit. Another benefit, Harris said, is the portal's ease of training and use. "People at SCCR have done extremely well with it," he said. "Some looked at it with a jaundiced eye initially. Now they see that there are numerous benefits."

"We are very pleased to be part of this project that improves patient care throughout the province using the latest technology," says Donald J. Peters, president and CEO of Horizon Health Network, which oversees the Stan Cassidy Centre of Rehabilitation. "Our staff has been committed to making this project work to improve patient outcomes and is to be commended for their efforts."

Hansen sees numerous benefits as well, and one of the most important components of the province-wide EHR solution in New Brunswick is the technology behind it. "One of our biggest challenges was standardization of information," she said. "We had to integrate two regional health authorities, each of which has four separate zones. Each had its own clinical information system on the hospital side and another on the community side."

That meant Hansen and her team had to deploy an EHR solution capable of integrating eight separate lab systems, dictionaries, naming conventions for tests and exams and more. "In addition to the business challenges, this was a massive technology infrastructure undertaking," she said.

She refers to the technology at work in New Brunswick – Orion Health Rhapsody Integration Engine coupled with Orion Health Concerto Clinical Workstation, a viewer – as the "unspoken key." The integration engine works at both the provincial level and in the zones, easing and simplifying the task of pulling data from legacy systems. "We've used it over and over, and it has reduced costs significantly," she said.



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In the often-challenging area of fostering adoption, Hansen said that Concerto is a major factor. "We've received excellent feedback about how easy it is to learn and use," she said. "We were able to train users in less than half an hour. Since physicians don't have a lot of spare time, it was great that they were able to pick it up so quickly."

In terms of the project's future, Hansen plans to drive more integration that will further connect silos of disparate healthcare data. The next milestone, she says,

will be an electronic medical record (EMR) that integrates as seamlessly as possible with the EHR to reduce the number of systems physicians need to enter and exit to provide patient care.

*Gary Folker is Orion Health's senior vice president for Canada. In addition to having more than three decades of experience in the healthcare industry, he has spent the last several years focused on the advancement of electronic patient information and the adoption of IT in healthcare.*

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