

Quebec's new e-health records may spur change

Quebec's adoption of a single system of electronic health records across its 34 hospitals is prompting calls for a reassessment of Ottawa's ehealth strategy.

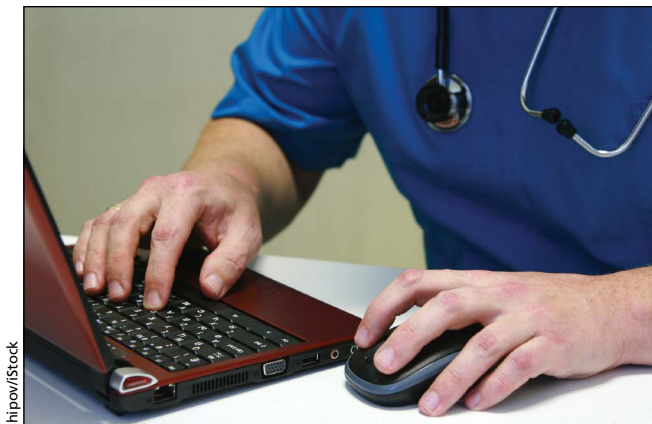
The Government of Quebec wants to rationalize the many competing electronic health record (EHR) systems purchased by hospitals, which are often partly funded by Canada Health Infoway, the federal agency that has invested \$2.1 billion since 2001 in often-incompatible systems. Rationalizing will help overcome longstanding problems with the lack of "interoperability" between competing and intentionally incompatible commercial EHR systems.

To help break the information logjam, Quebec Health Minister Dr. Gaétan Barrette announced on Dec. 17 that [all hospitals will now be required to implement Cristal-Net](#), a homegrown system developed on a not-for-profit basis by clinician-scientists in Québec City and Grenoble, France.

Cristal-Net, which has been tested in the five Québec City hospitals, will reduce costs while improving the movement of records between hospitals throughout the province, says Jean Boulanger, who leads the system's development as director of information technology at the Centre hospitalier universitaire de Québec-Université Laval in Québec City.

"After 17 years supporting the evolution and innovation of this system, the provincial government is now convinced Cristal-Net will help solve the mess," says Boulanger.

Quebec's decision sends an important signal to the rest of the country, says Joe Cafazzo, director of the Centre for Global eHealth Innovation at the University of Toronto. "There was an assumption made that [the software] industry would solve the interoperability problem, but they didn't because it wasn't in their interest, so perhaps Quebec's decision isn't surprising," says Cafazzo.



Quebec is rationalizing multiple electronic health records across its 34 hospitals into one system.

Infoway Executive Vice-President Jennifer Zelmer says that rather than stipulating how its provincial and territorial government partners make decisions around the technologies they purchase with federal grants from Infoway, the federal agency has always focused "on the end result" in promoting usage of electronic records.

"The downside of this approach has been that vendors didn't market interoperable systems," explains Cafazzo. The government of Ontario has placed a hold on EHR purchases, notes Cafazzo, due to concerns about a lack of planning and interoperability. "There is growing appreciation that many provinces cannot solve the interoperability problem on their own."

Infoway spokesperson Dan Strassbourg says project sponsors are now required to select software that is certified on requirements that include privacy, security and interoperability "in order to receive the total funds available to them by Infoway."

Infoway officials note that according to [data from a 2015 survey](#) by the New York-based Commonwealth Fund, EHR usage by Canadian primary care physicians has tripled over the past decade, with an estimated 73% now using them.

Robin Osborn, the survey's lead author, agrees that these are encouraging results for Infoway (which co-funded the

survey). But Osborn also notes that progress on the clinical use of records remains hampered by the interoperability disconnect. For example, a recent international [survey published in 2015 in Health Affairs](#) indicates that only 19% of primary care clinicians surveyed were able to exchange patient summaries with clinicians outside their practices.

Robyn Tamblyn, scientific director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Institute of Health Services

and Policy Research, says establishing Infoway outside of a national health care organization helped create a "disconnect" between its "infrastructure" plan and the actual clinical needs of patients and clinicians. In a [2013 paper in BMC Public Health](#), Tamblyn and coauthors concluded that rather than continue to rely on Infoway, "the Public Health Agency of Canada should develop the expertise to lead public health [health information technology] policy."

Tamblyn's questioning of the need for Ottawa to continue funding Infoway was echoed in a July 2015 [report by the federal Advisory Panel on Healthcare Innovation](#). Noting that "Canada is being held back by incomplete interoperability, as well as gaps in uptake of electronic medical records", the panel recommended the federal government terminate Infoway's existence as a separate entity and instead tackle ehealth within an agency with greater clinical engagement.

Dr. Jane Philpott, the new federal minister of health, is currently assessing federal ehealth efforts, confirms spokesman Andrew MacKendrick. "This topic is part of her mandate letter and as she works with her provincial and territorial counterparts in the coming months there will be more to update Canadians on." — Paul Webster, Toronto, Ont.