

Patients want access to digital health information

The decades-long push to bring Canadian health care into the information age has focused on connecting hospitals and clinicians and building giant data repositories. But according to experts at a national conference on e-health in Ottawa, Ontario, patients' demands for electronic connections to their health care providers and for their health records and technologies that help them monitor and manage their health, are not a priority. And that's a gigantic mistake, these experts say.

"The biggest workforce in health care is patients," argued Dr. Michael Evans, a family physician who runs the Health Design Lab at the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, Ontario. "Technology has to enable patient education."

Double-lung transplant recipient H el ene Campbell, agreed: "Technology is the way for patients to take control." She argued for the need for much faster reform at the conference, "eHealth 2013: Accelerating Change," May 26–29.

Patients will increasingly use digital technologies to compare, assess and choose their health care providers, observed Ed Percy, the health expert at CGI UK, a unit of CGI Group Inc., a Montr eal, Quebec-based vendor of e-health software and services.

"You're working in the last of the great supply-driven industries," Percy warned. "The arrival of consumerism is going to stress health care in ways we can hardly envisage."

Online access to health care will be crucial to reforming primary health care, added Mary Russell, project director of personal health records for the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, which is testing the introduction of online personal health records to patients in that province.

"Consumers are doing everything else online these days," she observed. "They expect the same connectivity with health care. We are way behind.



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Consumers find much of what they need online and expect the same connectivity with health care.

It's not a matter of 'if we do this' but 'when and how.'"

Dave Sellers is the director of operations for the West Carleton Family Health Team in Carp, Ontario, which has 3700 patients using personal health records connected to clinicians via the clinic's electronic health records sys-

tems. He said "patients would rather text or email than pick up the phone, and it's more efficient for staff to handle electronic messages than phone calls." Sellers says patient-use of their online personal health records has tripled since 2011.

Joe Cafazzo, lead of the Centre for

Global eHealth Innovation at the University of Toronto, says online access to clinicians and health records is just one way in which digital technologies is driving health care consumerism. A flood of new sensing and monitoring technologies that consumers can download onto their smartphones is on its way.

Despite all the promise and popularity of such innovations, Canadian progress in consumer use of health information technology has been dismal, said Fraser Ratchford, group program director for consumer health and innovation at Canada Health Infoway, the agency managing \$2.1 billion in federal e-health projects.

Citing data indicating that at most 7% of Canadians can book medical appointments, obtain prescriptions and get lab results online, Ratchford described the situation as “disheartening” (www.commonwealthfund.org/Publications/In-the-Literature/2012/Nov/Survey-of-Primary-Care-Doctors.aspx).

A Conference Board of Canada survey commissioned by Infoway, estimated that consumer health technologies, including consulting with health care providers, accessing test results and online prescription renewals, could have saved Canadians nearly 70 million hours of time in 2011. Adult patients said they could have avoided nearly

47 million in-person visits in 2011 if they had been given access to these online tools.

Infoway has committed only one-six-hundredth of its \$2.1-billion in federal funds to consumer health information technologies. — Paul Christopher Webster, Toronto, Ont.

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Editor’s note: This is the first of a two-part series at cmaj.ca on the “eHealth 2013: Accelerating Change conference”.