Chapter X

Understanding Health Information Networks in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Findings from a preliminary survey of health information networks (HINs) established in various parts of Canada lead us to suggest that buy-in and participation in development of the alliance by physicians and other providers is critical. Also, most healthcare providers are not aware of the difficulties involved in establishing connectivity in the networks we examined. Nor should they be, perhaps. We found that networks that pursued a comprehensive set of applications closely linked to providing better care for patients were more likely to be considered successful by partner organizations and providers.

Alliance partners who had a history of interaction prior to the formal establishment of the health information network in question seemed to get to application development quicker than when the alliance was created only because a network was needed. Many alliances reported the positive effect that external players had in terms of helping alliance partners overcome differences, sustain momentum, and provide funds and expertise as needed.
INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the National Forum on Health in Canada recommended establishment of a culture of evidence-based decision making in which decision makers at all levels (providers, administrators, policy makers, patients and the public) would use high quality evidence to make informed choices about health and healthcare. Across Canada, health professionals, healthcare institutions and provincial Ministries of Health have begun to look for alternative ways to relay and utilize health information (Roos et al., 1998). Information has become an increasingly vital commodity in an effort to measure process, efficiency and patient health outcomes in an era where provincial governments grapple with rising costs in their healthcare systems, falling revenues from the federal government and uncertain provincial economies.

The Canadian healthcare system is largely publicly funded, publicly administered and intended to provide a uniform level of access to medically necessary care to all Canadians wherever they live or travel in Canada. Lacking the market discipline that is offered in a privately funded or managed system, the Canadian system has lagged in efforts to ensure and measure effectiveness. The constitutional authority to deliver healthcare rests with the provinces in Canada, although the federal government enforces national standards through the Canada Health Act, and contributes what many have described as a shrinking share of the overall costs of running the healthcare system.

Reforms within the Canadian system are typically initiated on a provincial basis, creating a patchwork quilt of approaches when viewed at the national level. Our examination of the emergence of health information networks across Canada

Figure 1. Map of Canada
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