Connected Care – Accessing Your Electronic Health Records

Have you ever wondered why you are asked to complete an intake form (your medical history, medications, etc.) at every medical office you visit? This largely happens because most healthcare providers do not automatically share patient information with one another. Unless requested, one healthcare provider (HCP) typically cannot see what a provider from another center documented. For example, your pharmacist cannot see your complete medical health history, they can only see what the prescribing doctor shares with them for that specific prescription. This is because historically, the only way to share health records was by fax. Despite modern technologies, fax machines remain the standard technology to use when sharing medical health records[1].

About Patient Health Records

Every patient has a medical health record and electronic health records (EHRs) are becoming the standard way to document patient health records. Most of the time, these records are attached to a provider's office, not the individual patient and a single patient's complete health record is scattered across multiple providers' offices and centres. This creates fragmentation of health records[2].

When health records are fragmented, HCPs can miss something or not have the information needed to treat a patient properly, which increases the risk of medical errors[1]. When faced with a breast cancer diagnosis, this means the different HCPs on your cancer care team may not be seeing the complete picture of your medical health history. Access to this information can be helpful in providing holistic and individualized care, avoiding duplication of tests, and preventing drug interactions. Fragmentation of health records can also mean having to repeat and retell your health history to every healthcare provider you encounter.

Interoperable Electronic Health Records

Patients need an approach to sharing their medical health history that follows them, rather than one that stays with the individual provider office or centre. One way this can be done is through connected care, and goes deeper than just medical records sharing. In a connected system, information flows seamlessly between providers[3]. When EHRs are connected, health information and records follow the individual, and are easily shared between providers[2]. While there may be privacy concerns about such a system, privacy laws ensure the secure sharing of patient health information[1]. Providers must ensure the confidential transfer of medical health information between providers[2].

When HCPs can share and access patient records, it has many positive impacts for patients, HCPs, and the healthcare system. In addition to reducing medical errors and improving safety, fully connected EHRs reduce stress for both patients and HCPs[2, 1, 4]. Connected EHRs also reduce unneeded primary care and emergency department visits, translating into fewer kilometres traveled to appointments, less time spent at medical centers, and less time absent from work or other activities[2].

Connected Care in Canada

Canada lags significantly behind other commonwealth countries with respect to EHR sharing[5]. In fact, there aren't any regions in Canada that has a truly interoperable health system[2], but every region will have different elements of connected care[2]. For example, almost all regions give patients some level of access to EHRs, but the type of record and timing of access varies between regions[6]. For patients, this means there is no single, standard way for them to access their health information resulting in health inequities. Standards and regulations are needed at the provincial and national level to correct this inequity[2].

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Self-Advocacy for Interoperable Electronic Health Records

Standardized EHRs are one critical component of an interoperable system, but EHRs alone won't automatically translate into EHR access or a fully interoperable system[2]. To address this, the federal government is implementing the pan-Canadian Health Data Charter and will soon implement the Connected Care Act (as of Fall 2024). These policies aim to set a framework to use EHRs in an interoperable way. Canada is also developing tools to guide the shift to integrated EHRs and health data interoperability[3].

Healthcare decision makers want to hear from Canadians like you about why access to EHRs is important to you. As standards and regulations about EHRs are developed, raising your voice about your desire to access your records is one way to influence a transition to connected care.

Four ways you can advocate for improved access to EHRs

1. Learn how to access your health records. This simple act can be extremely impactful because it creates a demand for increased access. This demand filters into improved EHR sharing and patient-centred care.

2. Share your perspectives with Canada Health Infoway through one of their community forums or working groups. Infoway is one organization developing standards for patient-centered EHRs. The feedback they receive from their community forums contributes to this work.

3. Reach out and contact your MP/MPP/MLA and express your support for improved access to your EHRs. When you express how valuable access to EHRs are to your elected official, they can become your advocacy partner by raising your concerns with healthcare decision makers. You can find your federal MP (using your postal code) at: https://www.ourcommons.ca/members.

4. Contact our federal Minister of Health, or your provincial Ministry of Health about the need for improved access to EHRs. When the public expresses support for improvements, ministers can act more promptly. As of November 2024, the Honorable Marc Holland is Canada's Health Minister. He can be contacted at mark.holland@parl.gc.ca.