



- MICHAEL MARTINEAU -

## How I Spent My Summer Vacation

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As the summer draws to a close and my kids return to school, I am reminded of a start of school ritual that awaited me each fall throughout elementary school. In an effort to assess how badly our writing skills had deteriorated over the summer or perhaps because they were simply nosy, my teachers asked us at the start of each school year to write an essay entitled "How I Spent My Summer Vacation". While it has been years since I last wrote such an essay, I had such an interesting and educational experience this summer that I just had to revive this nearly forgotten tradition in order to share my experience with you.

For most of the spring and part of the summer I worked long hours as part of a Branham Group Inc. team conducting an in-depth study on eHealth in Canadian hospitals. So, when I finally had some spare time in mid-July, how did I choose to spend my time? By taking off to the cottage? By playing a few rounds of golf? Nope, I headed off to eHealth camp!

While it wasn't quite a summer camp in the traditional sense, I did sign up to be part of the inaugural Health Informatics bootcamp hosted by the Waterloo Institute of Health Informatics Research. While researching the environment in which eHealth spending and projects take place, I learned that one of the impediments that may slow progress on eHealth implementations in Canada is the shortage of skilled health information professionals, particularly those with applied health informatics training. When I heard about the bootcamp, I decided that I would take the opportunity to learn more about health informatics and the type of skills that are expected to be in short supply.

The Health Informatics bootcamp is the brainchild of Dominic Covvey, a professor at the University of Waterloo and the Executive Director of the Waterloo Institute of Health Informatics Research, though he is quick to point out that many people contributed to transforming the initial concept into reality. Since Canada's universities can currently produce less than 100 new health informatics graduates each year and Canada Health Infoway projects a shortage of nearly 2,000 such trained professionals, Dominic decided that a more rapid response was needed. Hence, the idea for the bootcamp was conceived.

The Health Informatics bootcamp is not intended to be a comprehensive, in-depth health informatics program. Rather, it is designed to provide a high level overview and to serve as an entry point for those interested in pursuing a career in health informatics. To facilitate rapid proliferation of the bootcamp concept, the Waterloo Institute of Health Informatics Research is placing all the course materials plus hours of videotape from the inaugural program in the public domain. Any and all organizations interested in hosting a bootcamp are encouraged to use this material as the basis for their own programs. The goal is to introduce 1,000 people to health informatics [with] in two years.

The inaugural bootcamp was held on the University of Waterloo campus, with participants offered the option of staying on campus in university residence. As it had been many years since I had lived in a university dorm, I opted for the total on-campus experience and choose to stay in residence. Unfortunately, the bootcamp took place during one of the hottest weeks of the summer and the residence experience turned out to be the only negative aspect of an otherwise superbly organized event. After one sleepless night I made a hasty retreat to the nearest air-conditioned hotel. (Oh well, it seemed like such a good idea when I signed up for the program back in the spring.)

The Health Informatics bootcamp opened on the evening of 17 July 2005 with a welcoming reception at which I got to meet some of my fellow students. I quickly found out that the participants had widely varied backgrounds including many who had no previous exposure to healthcare as well as several healthcare providers interested in learning more about how to apply information technology in clinical settings. While I only had a short trip from Ottawa to Waterloo, I discovered that a number of participants traveled from across the country to attend what promised to be a truly unique experience.

The instructional portion of the bootcamp started the next morning with an opening presentation by Dominic Covvey during which he assured us that daily calisthenics were not part of the program and that we did not have to address him as "Sir". Dominic explained that the format for the bootcamp was a series of presentations on various aspects of health informatics that would be delivered by people with hands-on, working knowledge of each specific topic.

While trying to absorb the material presented during the one-week program was somewhat like trying to drink water from a fire hose, the sheer variety of topics ensured that there was something of interest to all participants. While I learned something from every presentation, I particularly enjoyed the presentation by Dwayne Patrick, Director of Information Systems at Grand River hospital, who offered a humorous look at the hectic day-to-day life of an IT director. Having been in a similar role in another industry, I could not stop laughing at his anecdotes. I also enjoyed the PACS demonstration by Agfa. It is one thing to read about what PACS technology can do. It is quite another experience to see first hand what is possible with this technology.

What brought the material alive and made it so interesting were the presenters. While for the most part the presenters were not professional educators, their mastery of their particular topics and their passion for sharing what they knew made their presentations particularly compelling. Participants were captivated by speakers such as 89-year-old Jan Steiner talking about the "Critical Impact of Health Informatics on Medical Practice" or Dr. David McLeod sharing personal experiences during his presentation on "Patient Safety".

To help Dominic and his team assess how much material was actually absorbed, participants were asked to complete a short test on every presentation at the start and at the end of each day. By asking the same questions before and after material was presented, Dominic hoped to get some idea of what participants had learned.

The program also included several fun activities. A banquet on Wednesday night provided an opportunity for participants to socialize with many of the presenters as well as with each other. After dinner, William Tatham of XJ Partners made a spirited presentation on technology in which his company has invested that he believes can be used to create a pan Canadian electronic health record.

To provide some relief from the sheer volume of material covered each day, Dominic held daily trivia contests. Do you know who first used the word “bug” in reference to an error in a computer program? I do and I won a prize in the daily trivia context. Email me if you’d like to know the answer<sup>1</sup>.

Having spent the previous six months researching the state of eHealth in Canadian hospitals, I found that the program gave me a context with which to better understand what I had learned through my research and thereby transform much of this information into knowledge. Some of the presentations confirmed what I already knew while other presentations provided information that I had been struggling to find. I felt that the program was well worth the investment in time and money and made for a very different but quite enjoyable summer vacation. Many thanks to Dominic for taking the initiative to make the eHealth bootcamp concept a reality, to Shirley<sup>2</sup> for an exceptionally well-organized event, and to the Waterloo Inn for providing me relief from the heat.

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley Fenton, Managing Director, Waterloo Institute for Health Informatics Research



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