



Alberta's EHR— Progress Personified

- ANDREW KOMES, STAFF WRITER -

Alberta took an important leap forward in healthcare with last October's launch of the Alberta Electronic Health Record (EHR). The Alberta EHR is the provincial network that links doctors, nurses, pharmacists and health care providers within communities and across regional boundaries. It contains patient data from existing repositories and continues to expand through data entered at the point of care from across the province. This allows health care providers throughout the province to access more patient medical information than ever before. With this support available, better patient care is becoming a reality for Albertans.

The Alberta EHR has been developed in conjunction with health care providers and their professional associations and colleges. Today more than 7,000 users have access to the information in the Alberta EHR through a secure Internet browser connection.

It offers providers more patient information including prescription information, approximately 80 per cent of all lab test results in the province and a person directory. It also includes decision-support tools such as drug interaction and allergy alerts.



"We spend most of our time processing orders ensuring the correct medications are ordered in the correct doses and schedules. We check for interactions, compatibilities, allergies and suitability of drugs for the diagnosis," explains Laurine Sanderson, a University of Alberta Hospital pharmacist. "We jumped at the chance to have access to more patient health information through the Alberta EHR."

The benefits of the system will be further enhanced with the introduction of a system-to-system integrated version of the Alberta EHR services. Through system-to-system messaging, health care providers will be able to view and input information directly through their clinical systems (e.g. EMRs, pharmacy systems, regional EHRs). By contributing data to the EHR through their clinical system, providers will continue to add to the provincial system more effectively. The integration of the EHR into clinical

systems is giving many physicians, such as Dr. Lawrence Olfert of Drumheller, cause for optimism.

"It's a great step if you're already using an EMR, but don't stop there. Without the EHR, you're missing some valuable information that makes your practice safer and more satisfying. And once the integration with your EMR is complete, the Alberta EHR will be invaluable."

Alberta Wellnet, a branch of Alberta Health and Wellness, has been working with physician office system vendors and pharmacy vendors in collaboration with CHITTA, the Canadian Healthcare Information Technology Trade Association, to develop the system-to-system testing environment and conformance process. Several vendors have completed conformance testing and are planning limited production rollouts at select clinic sites. Over the next several months, Wellnet expects more and more providers will be seamlessly accessing the EHR through their clinical systems.



The use of computers is becoming more and more commonplace in doctors' offices.

The reason? More information.

Having more information at the point of care simply enables better health outcomes. Many studies recommend the acceleration of applying new technologies, such as an EHR, to offer better care to patients. One Canadian study suggests that the percentage of elderly patients with at least one potentially inappropriate prescription fell from 32 per cent to 18 per cent as a result of using tools like the Alberta EHR. By being able to supplement their medical judgment with a greater bank of information, lab test results and pharmaceutical information, medical professionals are able to offer better care.

One of the common misconceptions of medical professionals have about using computers is that the process will disrupt their office and make daily tasks harder or more complicated. With physicians becoming more accustomed to using computers in their work and the majority of pharmacies already automated, the change in work practices is less than imagined. As many offices have adopted EMRs, doctors are becoming more accustomed to referring to computers on patient cases.

"Because we had already computerized and were comfortable with our new automated clinic operation, the Alberta EHR, by comparison, was an easy transition. The learning curve was fairly straightforward," says Dr. Harvey Sternberg of the University of Alberta Family Medicine Clinic.



The Alberta EHR also offers providers flexibility in how they incorporate it into their workflow. Some will access the information initially just for more complex cases. Other will use it just to look up lab test results. As their comfort level grows with the system, users will be more apt to use other components.

Joan Childs, a registered nurse in Edmonton, was skeptical of the effect the EHR would have on her health centre. However, after learning the system and making some minor adjustments in her workflow, she and her fellow nurses at the centre are fully onboard,



"It's not always obvious right away how something might enhance your practice and how important it will become to your work. Don't be afraid to embrace change. The Alberta EHR really does help us deliver quality patient care."

All providers that connect to the EHR receive training to help them through the transition. The EHR browser was designed as a user-friendly and intuitive application by clinicians to fit well into their workflow. Additional help is available not only on screen, but through a telephone help desk to assist professionals should they encounter a problem.

"This is not a difficult application to learn," says Tom Keller, a pharmacist in the community of Leduc, "I thought it would be a difficult program to use and very awkward to integrate into our daily practice, but it wasn't at all. It has very logical navigational pathways and always provides a help menu if you should need it."



Healthcare providers that have made the transition are already seeing the benefits of the Alberta EHR; for example, time saved looking for test results or clarifying prescription details. More information available directly at the point of care is leading to better health outcomes. With increased amounts of patient information readily available, doctors have an invaluable decision support tool that is accessible with just a few mouse clicks.

The upcoming integrated versions will make the use of the Alberta EHR even easier. Seamless communication between the EHR and clinical systems will enable providers to access the provincial network through a single application, minimizing the impact on workflow.

The EHR has shown steady growth in both number of subscribers and its progress in developing an integrated connection to a facility's existing clinical system. After just one year of operation, the Alberta EHR is up and running with more than 7,000 users already signed on.

Alberta Wellnet continues to develop the Alberta EHR and promote its use to Alberta health professionals. Wellnet regularly provides improvements to enhance the system.

With several integrated EMRs currently undergoing their final phases of testing and pharmacy systems underway, the number of Alberta EHR users is set to grow. Limited production rollouts are already underway at some facilities and are being met with great enthusiasm. These test sites provide the real world testing that enables the software vendors to fine-tune their software before deploying province-wide.

Alberta has gained a reputation as a medical pioneer. From cardiac procedures to information technology, the province has been working to provide innovative solutions to today's medical challenges. By increasing the quality and quantity of information available to health care providers, Alberta hopes to improve the quality of health care throughout the province and provide a model to the world for innovative health information technology.

For more information about the Alberta EHR, visit www.albertaehr.ca.

