



- SERGE J. TAILLON, CIHI COLUMNIST -

Health information standards: ... The time is now!

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The field of health information is developing at an unprecedented pace, with benefits for health providers and patients alike. The convergence of technical capabilities, political will, and funding commitments from the First Ministers have created a moment of opportunity that we may not see again for many years

In this column, I want to discuss how that opportunity applies to health infrastructure standards in particular, and how CIHI and others are working to make the most of it. I'll touch on some of the latest developments in health infrastructure, and the ways that the domestic and international scenes are converging.

In a nutshell, I want to answer three questions: Why Standards? Why Now? And Why CIHI?

The answer to the first question will be clear to our readers. Providers and funders around the world recognize that there is inherent value in national and international standards, both to increase the quality of health information and to provide interoperability between jurisdictions.

As to the second question - Why Now? - The timing for health infrastructure standards has never been better. A combination of Will, Capacity and Capability is coming into place that creates the potential for unprecedented progress.

What do I mean by those three factors? First, by "Will," I mean that the desire to move forward is evident on all sides. Most importantly, the public wants greater access but also greater transparency and accountability. Provider organizations recognize the potential for improved information to enhance efficiency and help them meet financial pressures. And finally, many health care professionals are ready to embrace new technologies and new modes of collaboration.

Second, by Capacity, I mean that the Will to change is coming together with new technologies. Security systems, for example, are finally overcoming the public's legitimate concerns about privacy, and allowing implementation of electronic health records on a large scale - as we have just seen in Alberta, for example.

And third, by Capability, I mean that the funding, political commitments, and coordinating structures are in place to support change, now that the will to move forward has found the technical capacity to make it possible.

So the time is right for standards; the only remaining question is, "Why CIHI?"

As the custodian of major national data holdings such as the

Discharge Abstract Database and the Hospital Morbidity Database, CIHI's work within Canada is well known. But we are just as active internationally, serving as a nexus for Canadian and international standards and further increasing the value of standards by maximizing our global connectivity.

In collaboration with the Federal and Provincial Ministries of Health and other agencies, CIHI has undertaken standards development and maintenance projects in a number of areas, including:

- ICD-10-CA - with international linkages to the WHO;
- ISO;
- Telehealth Standards and Guidelines;
- HL7 and HL7 Canada;
- NeCST (National e-Claims Standards);
- The Partnership for Health Information Standards; and
- EHRS (Electronic Health Record Solution), as a preferred provider to Canada Health Infoway

I'd like to look at a few of these collaborations in more detail, beginning with ISO. Canada has undertaken several important leadership roles within ISO/TC 215, including membership in the Chairman's Advisory Group, the senior strategic forum guiding the work of the Technical Committee. From our own research expertise and experience, CIHI has contributed to the work of ISO/TC 215, providing standards development leadership in the important areas of health indicators.

CIHI is also very pleased to serve as the Secretariat for Health Level 7 (HL7) Canada, representing Canadian interests in the international development of HL7, the world's most successful health messaging standard. The HL7 mission is to develop global, open data standards, allowing different health information systems to communicate.

CIHI also provides the management secretariat for NeCST, the National e-Claims Standards project, coordinating the range of e-claims initiatives occurring across Canada among provider associations and private and public payers. This is an ambitious undertaking, breaking new ground in collaborative efforts and consensus building. We're using a consensus-driven, balanced representation governance model, with the goal of reaching a Pan-Canadian agreement on the content and structure of electronic health communication standards. Among other aspects of the project, we're working with several jurisdictions to develop unique identifiers for clients, providers, and facilities, which form the backbone of a wide range of Client Registry applications.

Another important collaboration is the Partnership, a CIHI initiative launched in 1996 to bring together academics and public- and private-sector experts in health information standards. It currently

comprises 100 organizations with over 400 representatives, providing input on projects and priority-setting and linking Canadian experts with their international counterparts through conferences and workshops.

Through CIHI's coordinating role, we hope to ensure maximum value for providers across the country, through Client Registry applications that will be interoperable with other databases and between provinces.

And finally, CIHI is working with Canada Health Infoway on another critical aspect of the emerging health-infrastructure in Canada, the Electronic Health Record Solution (EHRS). CIHI is an integral part of Infoway's strategic plan, as Infoway's preferred provider, both domestically and internationally, of health infrastructure standards solutions.

This mandate has made for exciting times for Canada and for CIHI. As the leader of health infrastructure standards development in Canada, we're pleased to be involved in this initiative. As a research institute, we're doubly pleased to be helping to open a new era in health and health care research and evaluation, which will be supported by the EHR.

These examples give an answer to the question "Why CIHI?" and a perspective on why I am so convinced that the time is now for health infrastructure standards. Standards are our business at CIHI: they are the foundations of health data and ultimately of information and knowledge. We need more and better information to improve the quality, safety, and accessibility of care; support more-informed decision-making, research and management; and improve efficiency and reduce costly duplication.

The goal of standards is interoperability, and our goal in working with all our partners is to achieve that interoperability not only within Canada, but also between Canada and the world. Health care is no longer just a national concern, but a global one. As Canadians, we have become accustomed to measuring our achievements against the best in the world, and there is no reason to expect less in the field of health care. On the contrary, I think that the more we measure our achievements in Canada, the more we will confirm that we are positioned to lead the development of health informatics in the 21st century!



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