



-DR. BILL HAVER, MEDICAL EDITOR -

## EHR and the Rule of 'Ate

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**M**y wife tells me I am a lousy cook. This may be true for several reasons (like my opinion that there is no such thing as too much pepper) but I think her basic premise is that I seem to have a problem in adhering to directions and, therefore, no matter how exquisite the ingredients, I end up with a less than perfect end product.

I would argue the same thing is happening to the concept of the Electronic Health Record.

In Canada we have the ingredients for one of the finest integrated medical systems in the world. One that not only communicates within itself but one that can communicate with the rest of the world. We have the people, the technology, and the desire (including the political will). The problem is that we cannot seem to put it all together.

Why? There are many reasons, and I am sure you have seen several yourselves, but the reasons that I have been able to identify boil down to turf protection and ego maintenance. It is the same old story: we are so busy protecting our own little fiefdoms that we forget the concept of the "greater good". We are so busy trying to look important or intelligent that we forget the concept of teamwork and cooperation.

Very early in my career I discovered the secret of success. It is very simple really: Work hard, never compromise your principles, and surround yourself with people that are smarter than you.

If you think you know it all then you are the problem, not the solution. If you think you know what the next person wants, needs or hopes for, then you are a fool, not a psychic. In forging a new paradigm, vision and leadership are fundamental necessities, however, ultimately you will fail unless you adhere to the directive to communicate, cooperate, delegate, collaborate and integrate.

I refer to this as the "Rule of 'Ate".

This is not just a series of suffixes that provide some nice alliteration. This is a fundamental rule in managing change. I did not read it anywhere. I lived it. I have been there, I have made the mistakes and I have learned the lessons. There may not be a lot of scientific evidence for it but I suspect this rule is as valid as the law of gravity.

Remember my analogy of the recipe. We have the ingredients already. We don't need to add anything else: there is only one thing worse than destroying the delicate balance of ingredients in a winning recipe and that is to fail to follow the directions outlined in the method. These steps (the Rule of 'Ate) are the "method" of the recipe for a successful Canadian EHR development and

implementation. Without these five basic steps our recipe is doomed. The soufflé is fallen. The pastry is cardboard.

In the comparatively narrow vertical market of healthcare IT we have several subdivisions that feel they know best. They want control. They feel they know what should happen. They want the money! They are so worried about a loss of power that they sacrifice the one tool that could help them achieve their goal - the Rule of 'Ate!

This is not really anything new. People have been hoarding power ever since that apple incident in the Garden of Eden. What is most frustrating is that these cerebral giants think they somehow know better than anyone else what is best for the healthcare system. They cannot see that the system is collapsing around them while they argue that the hospital's viewpoint is more important than the physicians, or the provincial project is more important than the federal one, or academia is a better investment than free enterprise, or... well, you get the idea.

What a pain in the butt! Are you as tired of this counter-productive bickering and backstabbing as I am? Don't try to tell me this is just healthy competition; fair competition is based on a level playing field: one set of rules and everyone knows them before the game starts. Here the rules appear to be made up as the game progresses and, even then, only in reaction to a crisis.

Crisis management is not a productive way to grow anything. (A friend once described it as the difficulty in worrying about whether your socks match while your hair is on fire.) Alternatively, growth management requires vision, insight, and understanding. I would add humility as well. It is more of an art than a technical skill. And this artist, in particular, is creating a collage that will color the country and incorporate the world.

The governments in power have finally (I hope you weren't holding your breath) agreed that the concept of the EHR is worth supporting and encouraging. So what happens? Every organization in the country that had any relationship with the healthcare industry suddenly feels that they are the experts. Some organizations appear to have some claim to at least a part of that expertise but closer examination shows that they have only adopted the EHR as a means to achieve a higher federal profile. Then they ignore and marginalize the people who worked so hard to develop that profile within the organization and replace them with people that simply have the same political perspective that they do.

What the hell is going on here? Remember my Rule of 'Ate? Did any of those principles allow for self-serving, ego massaging, turf protection? I didn't think so.

Everyone knows someone that is trying to protect his or her job at the expense of someone or something else. Don't let that be you. Give your own attitude a critical appraisal:

1. Is your approach aimed at open standards and competition or do you promote proprietary solutions?
2. Do you invite outside opinion, open debate and constructive criticism?
3. Do you respect the experience and expertise of those who have actually done the work or do you prefer to plagiarize their work and remarket it as your own?
4. Do you openly encourage new ideas and divergent thought and then try to incorporate everything that works into the final product or does everyone have to follow the company line?
5. Do you believe that your job or your company or your institution or your profession is the only logical one to guide the shift to EHR or do you feel that everyone in healthcare has a role and we must incorporate each perspective in the final product?
6. Do you actively survey allied professions to ensure you are not at cross-purposes?
7. Do you invite collaboration?
8. Do you walk the walk or just talk the talk?
9. Do you think your competition respects you for your integrity?
10. Do you think the people who are affected by the decisions you make feel that they had some influence in the decision making process?

Honesty and integrity are not incompatible with success. We need to get over this petty jealousy and move to a higher plain. We need leadership that is open, honest and transparent. We need to respect true experience and expertise. We need to encourage competition in a free enterprise system where we also ensure a level playing field. A place where the rules are known in advance and opportunities are publicized and open to all. We need to respect the academic as well as the practitioner. We need to respect the hospital's needs as well as the needs of those in private practice. We need to respect the needs of regional, provincial and federal agencies in their quest to make this concept a reality (and they need to set the standards, ensure the fairness and then get out of the way). We need to educate both our current as well as all following generations of professionals. We need to stop looking for a handout and start showing a benefit.

We need to follow the Rule of 'Ate.

