



-DR. BILL HAVER, MEDICAL EDITOR -

Do we thrive... or just survive?

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The Romanow report has now been released and the predictable dichotomy has emerged. What I find most interesting, however, is that whether you loved it or hated it you have to admit that it captured the attention of Canadians. The media preoccupation rivaled that for the Gulf War or the War on Terrorism. It leaves little doubt that the current status of our healthcare system is at least a major concern, if not a crisis, in the minds of the Canadian populace.

I am sure that the pages of this journal will be brimming with comments, criticism, praise and condemnation. Each commentary will be predictable and will reflect the bias of the segment of the healthcare industry from which it arises: Hospitals feel ignored. Academia feels undervalued. Homecare is understaffed. Physicians feel persecuted. Long-term care is overburdened. Provinces want more money. The feds want more control. Yadda, yadda, yadda.

I am not minimizing the concerns of any of these people. I am sure they all have valid issues and they all feel equally just in their position. But their opinions emanate from the perspective of a stakeholder and, understandably, reflect their self-interest (and the prejudices that arise from those interests) and, therefore, lack the cold objectivity required to be credible. Mr. Romanow is not above this either. His political history shone through like a beacon in the night. His proposed solutions are steeped in the socialist ideology that nurtured his political maturation.

What did you expect? Well, I, for one, had hoped for some more creativity.

It is apparent to me that Mr. Romanow was inundated with conflicting information about the status of our current system and was confused by the fact that everyone that spoke to him during his commission's tour felt that more money was the solution. Yet he was also told not to increase taxes. So he comes up with the brilliant idea to spend more money but not raise any taxes. Just take it from reserves or the surplus (as if this source was sustainable) - because debt is acceptable if it is preserving "Canadian values".

This is politically palatable since it appeals to our society's burning need to be distinctive as well as arrogant when discussing our social value system. Clearly, we have it right and the rest of the world has nothing to offer. Our current system's problems of decay, demoralization, abuse and misuse are figments of the imagination of some disgruntled healthcare worker. Our delays, our inaccessibility, our professional fatigue and frustration, and our archaic operational standards are all just growing pains as our adolescent healthcare scheme suffers through the cruelty of hormonal hell.

Well, I don't buy it.

We have to admit that we do have these problems and it is time for serious intervention. No more bandaids. No more palliative care. If definitive action is not taken, I predict we will suffer through at least another ten years of this death spiral until someone of sufficient political stature and courage has the insight to realize that Canadians are smart enough to decide for themselves just what their values should be or will allow. Someone will have to give Canadians some choices for change not rhetoric for sustaining the status quo.

Yes, I know Mr. Romanow did support specific change - but it was change within a limited tolerance level. A self-imposed limitation that assumes Canadians would allow the system to collapse if it was even partially self-sustaining. I applaud his demand that any money spent is spent for making change. And his position that all expenditures are documented and the process is transparent and accountable. Of course! This is not quantum mechanics; this is just good business sense. Why not let good business sense allow the system to flourish? Give the system some latitude and give Canadians a chance to choose.

I suspect we will choose to protect our poor, to maintain universality and portability, and to base access on need and not just on ability to pay. But I also suspect that we will choose to find a way to reward excellence and not just the lowest common denominator. We will choose to improve patient care without driving the country further into debt. We will choose to improve professional satisfaction without making them all civil servants. We will choose to allow people to be creative in offering services and not limit them with some artificial restriction on initiative.

Those of you reading this have a demonstrated interest in information technology within the healthcare sector. I would suspect that most of you are very happy with the emphasis that Mr. Romanow has placed on this technology as a potential solution to some of our systemic problems. I am as well. I firmly believe that IT solutions can improve the care of patients, reduce and control costs within the system and improve the lives of those dedicated people working on the front lines of healthcare.

However, if this is so self-evident, why has the adoption of technology and the concept of the EHR been so slow? Could it be that there has been no well articulated business case? Could it be that there has never been any incentive to accelerate this process because there was never any incentive to do anything better. It has been a question of survival rather than excellence. Make it through the day rather than seize the day. And that is very sad. We not only deserve better, we need better.

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I have been told that Mr. Romanow's report is "the re-birth of Medicare" and, while I don't really see it as that, I can liken the situation to a birth. The infant was actually born 40 years ago (the term "infant" may be a stretch) and -in pediatric terms - has failed to thrive. It has survived but it has not flourished. Will Mr. Romanow's proposals allow for accelerated growth and development? I hope so, but intellectually this seems unlikely.

I would have preferred the more aggressive approach but I will support those baby steps that I see as productive within his plan. And the emphasis on EHR is not only significant but crucial to the survival of this struggling infant. I hope our future success in this area proves to be the catalyst for growth and change within our system.



Maybe then we can thrive, not just survive.

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Senate Committee Endorses Infoway Strategy

Recommendation would modernize health-care information systems and improve patient care

Canada Health Infoway (*Infoway*) welcomed the recommendation of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, chaired by Senator Michael Kirby, that would see increased investment in Canada's health-care information systems. The committee recommended that *Infoway* receive stable funding for each of the next five years to ensure the development of interoperable electronic health record solutions on a pan-Canadian basis.

"We are delighted that the Kirby Committee recognizes electronic health records (EHR) are a key building block to improved quality and timeliness in health care delivery" noted Linda Lizotte-MacPherson, president and chief executive officer of *Infoway*. "This is the first step in gathering health-related information that will allow for evidence-based decision-making throughout the whole health-care system. Moving from paper records to electronic records is essential to modernizing and transforming the health-care system."

Infoway, an independent, not-for-profit corporation created by the federal, provincial and territorial governments, is moving aggressively to establish the foundation for interoperable EHR solutions over the next 12 to 18 months, with a goal of having the main components in place within five to seven years. Last June, the corporation's business plan and investment framework were endorsed by its members: the federal, provincial and territorial Deputy Ministers of Health.

In its report, the Kirby Committee recognizes that the cost of achieving a pan-Canadian interoperable EHR solution will greatly exceed the initial \$500-million investment contributed by the federal government. The committee makes the following recommendations:

The federal government provide additional financial support to Canada Health Infoway Inc. so that Infoway develop, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, a national system of electronic health records.

Furthermore, the Committee recommends that:

Additional federal funding to Infoway amount to \$2 billion over a five-year period, or an annual allocation of \$400 million.

"We are playing catch-up," underscored Ms. Lizotte-MacPherson. "Whereas in the U.S., health-care spending on information technology (IT) is around 5.5% of operating budgets, in Canada we invest only 1.8% of health care operating budgets for IT. The gap is even wider when we compare the health-care industry with other information-intensive sectors, such as banking and government, where IT spending ranges from 9-13% of operating budgets."

"*Infoway's* value-added," she continued, "is our collaborative approach. By working in partnership with health-care providers and by developing interoperable solutions-usable and reusable by all health jurisdictions in Canada-*Infoway* ensures that each dollar invested provides maximum return and impact. Our analysis shows that if jurisdictions were to implement EHR in isolation, the estimated one-time costs climb to \$3.8 billion. However, with *Infoway's* collaborative approach, the cost is estimated at \$2.2 billion-a potential saving of \$1.6 billion."

Canada Health Infoway (*Infoway*) is an independent not-for-profit corporation with offices in Montreal and Toronto. The origins of the corporation go back to September 2000, when the First Ministers agreed "to work together to strengthen a Canada-wide health infrastructure to improve quality, access and timeliness of health care for Canadians." This led to the creation of *Infoway* by the federal, provincial and territorial governments. The corporation's mission is to foster and accelerate the development and adoption of pan-Canadian interoperable electronic health information systems. *Infoway's* approach is to invest strategically and work in partnership with stakeholders including the private sector. *Infoway* acts as a catalyst, leveraging its financial resources through targeted investments and building on best practices. For more information please visit their website at: <http://www.infoway-inforoute.ca>