



- KAREN MCCARTHY -

e-Health 2001: A Roaring Success

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This year's *e-Health 2001* conference was a resounding success, attracting participants from across Canada to Toronto in May for this premier health informatics event. Co-sponsored by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) and COACH-Canada's Health Informatics Association-speakers and workshop leaders shared their expertise on a wide variety of topics related to the world of e-health.

In addition to the many speakers and the high caliber educational information, *e-Health 2001* offered a plethora of exhibitors to match. There were 92 exhibits as well as vendor demonstrations and an Internet Café, making this trade show not only a success but also an important and valued part of the conference.

In the opening keynote address, Dr. Roberta Bondar challenged delegates to "think outside the box", to take risks and be creative in finding solutions. As the first Canadian woman to fly in space, Dr. Bondar shared her experiences, noting, "Space is a great place to do research. It has provided us with a brand new way of looking at our bodies that has involved developing technologies and keeping our minds open."

Sending a person into space is an extraordinary challenge, one that requires ongoing monitoring of the astronaut's vital signs as well as the environment. Capturing data on the changes that occur in the body helps people to understand the impact of gravity. And technology has played a key role in this monitoring process, said Dr. Bondar.

Dr. Francis Lau: Canada Needs a New Model of Learning for Health Informatics

As the health care system evolves and the use of technology becomes more widespread, Canada is going to need the right people with the right skills and competencies to get the job done. And this going to be a challenge unless we take the necessary steps to expand health information education and training opportunities, says Dr. Francis Lau.

Dr. Lau noted that the demand for health informatics professionals is rising. A recent *U.S. News* story reported that by 2006, one in every six jobs would be in the health sector with informaticians among the top five specialties. A recent survey of 45 CEOs and CIOs of health care organizations showed that 59% currently have job vacancies in health informatics and 83% expect the number of positions and demand to increase over time.

At the University of Victoria, where he is an Associate Professor and Director of the Health School of Health Information Science, Dr. Lau said there is a 100% placement rate for co-op students and enrollment in the undergraduate program continues to grow. Until recently, the University of Victoria was the only institution to offer a four-year undergraduate program in health informatics.

Most of the current programs, including undergraduate, certificate and professional development programs, are delivered in the traditional way, face-to-face, on campus and full-time, says Dr. Lau who notes that for full-time professionals seeking to upgrade or learn new skills, there is no long distance format available.

Enter the Canadian School of Health Informatics. Although still a concept, Dr. Lau told delegates that this national school would take a consortium approach, "bringing together educational institutions, employer organizations, professional associations and colleges, funding agencies and the intended learners to work together so see how we can improve the education learning system in health informatics.

The proposed model for the Canadian School of Health Informatics would unify diverse institutional program offerings into a national infrastructure, emphasizing lifelong learning, and would be accessible to individual learners in all three streams of health information-practice, education and research.

The range of programs would start with individual courses for professional development, followed by more intensive certificate and diploma programs to produce knowledgeable health informatics users. For those interested in a career in health informatics, additional intensive training would be available through a bachelor of science or arts. Doctoral training would be available for individuals wishing to establish an advanced academic career in health informatics education and research or to become an expert in a practice setting.

To make this school a reality, however, will require the harmonization of existing programs, says Dr. Lau. The programs will need to be relevant, accessible, flexible and adopt flexible delivery options (such as e-learning, one-week sessions, etc.).

However, she added that designing and producing monitoring devices for use in space poses a unique challenge since the astronauts are bringing "earth equipment" to operate in space without the benefit of test-pilots. "How many of you have taken software to a new place and have had it run perfectly?" she asked the audience. "The whole issue of developing technologies is to solve problems before they happen (this is especially true in space). We need massive brain power in order to be creative and solve these problems."

Improving Health Information in Canada - A Must!

The first full day of sessions, held on Sunday, May 27, began with a keynote address by Dr. Duncan Sinclair, a Professor Emeritus and former Dean of both Medicine and Arts and Science at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. "All stakeholders agree on the need for an integrated health information management system," he told delegates, providing an overview of the Canada Health Infoway (CHI). This is a newly established not-for-profit corporation endorsed by the federal, provincial, and territorial governments and funded by an initial grant of \$500 million.

According to Dr. Sinclair, CHI's objectives are threefold: to develop mechanisms, such as hotline services and consolidated Web sites, to enable health care consumers to access health information they can use; to facilitate the work of health care providers through technology and sound business practices; and to create a unified network of electronic health records across the continuum of care, "an absolute guarantee of confidentiality and security" being a precondition for this last objective.

Other Plenary Sessions Examined e-Health Issues

On Monday, May 28, plenary sessions were led by Dr. Francis Lau who spoke on the future of health informatics (see insert) and John Wetmore, vice-president of IBM.com. Mr. Wetmore shared his experiences with delegates on e-business, expressing concern that the health care sector is not yet taking advantage of the possibilities available through technology. He urged the e-health community to direct creative energy towards developing partnerships with other institutions and the private sector to develop adequate infrastructure to meet the challenges of e-business.

On Tuesday, May 29, Matt Anderson, the CIO for University Health Network, led the audience through an engaging session on the ABCs of being a health care CIO.

He asked the audience: Who is the perfect candidate to step into the shoes of a health care chief information officer? Is it someone with a computer science background or a systems engineer? Is it a physician with a Master of Business Administration, someone with a Ph.D. in information science or an English major with a Master of Health Administration? Mr. Anderson noted that he had the latter qualifications.

He emphasized that the health care CIO must focus on identifying and building the necessary skills to do the job (including human resources, change management and information technology) and this includes building a management team to fill in the gaps. The bottom line, according to Mr. Anderson is that the CIO needs to have a skills set in all of these areas.



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