

Nova Scotia's IS Coalition

When officials at the Cape Breton District Health Authority in Nova Scotia were searching for an information system to replace their outdated processes, a unique idea began to materialize. For years, health care professionals in the province wondered if it was possible to share electronic information with fellow hospitals through a standardized system. They wanted a system that would track vital data about patients who visit multiple hospitals over time, one that would reduce training time for health care personnel moving from one area facility to another. To achieve this visionary approach, government authorities would have to cooperate with a fragmented group of health care organizations spread across 55,000 square kilometers - no small feat by any means.

Yet through a tireless effort built on trust, hard work, and a little bit of necessary compromise, 34 hospitals in Nova Scotia are now on track to be wired with a uniform information system. The Cape Breton region will be one of the initial installation sites.

"It would have been a lot quicker had we decided to install an information system on our own, but we thought this way would benefit the people we serve in the province better," says John Malcom, chief executive officer of the Cape Breton District Health Authority and co-chair of the Nova Scotia Department of Health Hospital IS Implementation Project. "It makes more sense to share information between health care providers. No one region is completely independent."

Going from concept to completion in a relatively short time required persistence and some good timing. The first step was assembling a functioning coalition among the various health care regions and establishing committees that would manage the decision-making process. In addition, the provincial government had to be a willing and active participant. During the initial stages of the initiative, the government in Nova Scotia signaled its support for the plan. But in provincial elections held in the summer of 1999, the leadership shifted from Liberal control to the Progressive Conservatives. The new administration, however, led by Premier John Hamm (a physician himself), agreed to continue government support for the IS project without objection.

"We did experience a bit of a delay with the change of government, but I'm confident we would have been successful no matter what,"

says Dieter Pagani, director of information technology for the Nova Scotia Department of Health. "The government understands the need for better patient care standards across the province."

Technically Speaking

Following a comprehensive selection process, Medical Information Technology, Inc. (MEDITECH) was tapped to provide the application system software for the project and EMC Corp. was identified for the hardware requirements.

MEDITECH, based in the Boston suburb of Westwood, MA, has developed a solid reputation in Canada working with health care organizations across the country, predominantly in Ontario, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Alberta, and British Columbia.



(L-R): John Malcom, CEO of the Cape Breton District Health Authority; Sarah Kramer, CIO of the Nova Scotia Department of Health; Dieter Pagani, Director of Information Technology, Nova Scotia Department of Health

"This is the first time we've had a chance to work with a provincial department of health. Up to this point we've been working with individual hospitals or individual regions and districts," says Ed Pisinski, senior vice president of sales and marketing for MEDITECH. "Now, in one fell swoop, we've created a single standardization of technology for all the hospitals in Nova Scotia (with the exception of the few facilities managed by the Capital Health Authority and the IWK Health Centre)."

MEDITECH's software provides the Nova Scotia Department of Health with a uniform electronic medical record for all patients receiving care in the

participating hospitals. Their implementation team will work closely with the implementation project team from the Department of Health as well as teams from individual hospitals. But the initial priority from a technological perspective, Pisinski said, is building universal terminology. "The main thing we're working on right now is definitions and standards on a basic level," he said. "Our system will allow for individual preferences at the local hospital level, but there needs to be standards at the higher, provincial level."

EMC, headquartered in Hopkinton, MA, provides the hardware, software, and services to get all of the information to work together. The EMC Symmetrix solution will consolidate dozens of hospitals' "information islands" into one seamless system, delivering the reliability and scalability to allow the system to expand as patients and facilities come on board.

“Access to relevant and current information will allow Nova Scotia’s Department of Health to provide improved and consistent patient care,” says Brian Hermanspan, director of global healthcare marketing for EMC. “With one system for all hospitals in the province addressing administrative and clinical reporting, the IT infrastructure will allow doctors and other caregivers across Nova Scotia to access secure patient information - from X-rays to medical allergy information - from anywhere in the province.”

Making it Work

A provincial team with representation from small, medium, and large hospitals has been formed to ensure that standards are developed and are in place before implementation commences. The implementation schedule for the first phase begins in full force during the first quarter of 2002. Cape Breton’s Health Authority and the Guysborough Antigonish Strait Health Authority will be the first groups to go live with the new system. “We’re going to be implementing the system in three phases,” says the Department of Health’s Pagani. “About a year from now you’ll see that first group truly up and running, and this will continue for about two and a half years.”

This phased approach makes it possible to implement the system in facilities of varying size at relatively the same time. This way, smaller hospitals won’t be ignored by the demands of larger operations. Decisions will be made from representatives across the region.

“I think this is certainly beneficial to the smaller hospitals in the province, because getting an information system may not be their top priority due to the budget and personnel concerns associated with operating independently,” says MEDITECH’s Pisinski. “I would have to think they’re delighted that the process was expedited.”

“Some hospitals in the province had systems that were very old, so the need for a standard IS was apparent,” concurs Pagani. “These hospitals truly want to leap into the 21st century.”

A Model for the Future?

Could the work being done today in Nova Scotia become a blueprint for other provinces? Let’s wait and see.

Pagani says the Nova Scotia Department of Health is concerned only with making sure the project is successful in its home province. Whether neighboring governments follow suit is up to them. “We’re really not trying to promote this approach outside the province, we’re concentrating on getting this up and running ourselves,” he said. “I think health care professionals outside Nova Scotia are watching what is being done here.”



International Medical Informatics Association

JOIN THE WORLD OF MEDICAL AND HEALTH INFORMATICS

Since 1967 we’ve been bringing the world together!

.... Healthcare and its delivery are close to the top of every nation’s social and political agenda.

.... The evolution of technology and the Internet is removing geographical boundaries, the field of health and medical informatics is transforming into a global resource – and marketplace.

... Science, research, education, commerce and consumers are increasingly working in harmony to exploit the benefits of the technical evolution and to address the ethical, legal, and social challenges that follow in its wake.

IMIA membership provides a unique opportunity for on-going medical and health informatics "intelligence" on a global scale.

Isn’t it time that you joined us?

The benefits that membership in IMIA provides:

Networking	with world leaders in the field of informatics in a forum intended to foster opportunities for collaboration and exchange of ideas.
Participation	not only are you aware of international issues and agendas – you are in a position to influence them.
Exposure	put a face and personality to your organization along with its activities and initiatives.
Information Exchange	develop a sense of direction of where the field is going from an international perspective – what challenges are being addressed.

www.imia.org

For further information contact:

Steven A. Huesing, Executive Director • Tel: 1.780.489.4531 • E-mail: imia@v-wave.com