



Last **W**ords

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Good News, Bad News

For most of this past spring and summer my family followed the story of my dying uncle through his final days. My 63-year old aunt sent us regular email updates and drew tremendous comfort from being able to share my uncle's ups and downs with the rest of the family. When my uncle had a good day we knew that it was the right time to give him a call. Conversely, when he had a bad day we took the opportunity to send my aunt words of encouragement.

More recently I delivered a presentation on Personal eHealth at the annual Atlantic Health Information Systems (AHIS) conference. In preparing my presentation material, I checked the results of the 2007 StatsCan Canadian Internet Use survey and found that nearly three quarters of adult Canadians have used the Internet for personal reasons in the past twelve months.

The StatsCan results and my own experiences both offer powerful testimony to the increasing pervasiveness of personal computers and the Internet in our everyday lives. Not only are people using the Internet, but they are using it for many everyday activities. For example, the StatsCan survey found that nearly two-thirds of Canadian Internet users have used the Internet to bank on-line, book or research travel on-line, and look up health information on-line.

The Good News: Other industries have trained consumers to use on-line services

The increasing pervasiveness of the Internet and personal computers is driving a significant shift in attitudes among healthcare professionals and patients. While only a few years ago there was tremendous reluctance to use computers in a healthcare setting, I contend that personal use of the Internet for common tasks such as on-line banking or communicating with the grandkids is making these same users much more comfortable with IT and more willing to embrace IT in the workplace.

Many pundits have remarked that the health sector lags other industries by as much as ten years in their use of

IT, particularly for processes associated with the delivery of care. The silver lining in this otherwise dark cloud is that the health sector now has a user base that is comfortable using IT for a wide variety of tasks. These users have been largely trained by other industries and the health sector does not need to make the same investments over again.

The Bad News: Other industries have trained consumers to use on-line services

At the same AHIS conference at which I presented, the CIO from a major Nova Scotia hospital gave a presentation on their recent kiosk pilot program in two outpatient clinics. She explained that a major driver for the project was clinician experience with kiosks at the airport. These clinicians enjoyed the convenience of kiosk check-in and asked the CIO why similar technology couldn't be employed at their hospital.

A number of health sector CIOs with whom I have spoken in the past six months have noted similar experiences. Healthcare professionals are now approaching them with ideas for IT-enabled services, many of which are modeled in some way on their experiences with IT-enabled services in other industries.

As patients and healthcare providers become more comfortable with IT in their everyday lives, their expectations for what is possible will be set and the health sector will be compelled to meet these expectations. An example of the type of expectations we can expect to face is patient access to their electronic health record. Many people who use on-line banking are aware that they can download their banking information into personal financial management software. They will expect to be able to do the same with their personal health information.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on this topic. You can reach me at michael.martineau@med2020.ca ●