



Linda Miller

Linda Miller is the President of COACH: Canada's Health Informatics Association and Deputy Minister, Alberta Health and Wellness in Edmonton, Alberta.

The Value of Audits and other External Control Mechanisms: Learning and Moving On

"Americans like to make money; Canadians like to audit it. I know no other country where accountants have a higher social and moral status." **Northrop Frye**

Agree or disagree with this quote, but we should all agree that an audit is a positive, essential mechanism in Canadian healthcare generally and ehealth in particular. I realize the intense media and public scrutiny about various industry audits at both the provincial and federal levels in recent months has resulted in widespread negativity around this process. As HI professionals, however, we need to learn from this experience and embrace auditing as a valuable standard operating practice.

To quickly summarize, the recent furor was acutely highlighted with the Ontario Auditor General's audit of ehealth Ontario, which zeroed in on missing and unacceptable procurement practices, among other problems. The Canadian Auditor General's report about Canada Health Infoway (Infoway) followed later in the year. In addition, auditors general across the country put various provincial ehealth initiatives under the microscope.

Why audit?

Audits can be good news on several fronts. In our healthcare system, where spending is forecasted to reach \$183.1 billion in this country in 2009, these assessments are key to public accountability. Anytime we are entrusted to spend taxpayers' dollars, it is imperative that we operate in a completely transparent manner, which the audit process facilitates and supports. Basically a fact-finding mission, an audit is normally made up of three phases – planning, examination and verification of facts and reporting.

The audit provides a valuable independent assessment of accomplishments funded by sizeable public investments. Yes, an audit, as we know only too well from the barrage of recent media reports, identifies problems. But, the fact-based exercise also documents the positives, adding credibility to the involved organization and the industry. The Auditor General's report about Infoway this fall, for example, noted the organization is applying appropriate governance mechanisms to carry out its mandate and objectives and making good use of strategic planning.

In addition, audit recommendations can signal government about the need for investment, policy changes and other important matters. A case in point is the focus on procurement in recent audits, providing beneficial lessons for us all.

Solid procurement practices and processes make up a fundamental control mechanism that, when conducted correctly, does not add unnecessarily to timelines. Key to ensuring fundamental control is the diligent preparation of the request for proposal to ensure the necessary requirements, including skills, project background, scope and deliverables, are thoroughly outlined. As the procurer, our role starts at the strategic planning stage where we need to develop a crystal clear understanding of the end result for a particular project. There may be many things we'd "like" to accomplish – the challenge is to identify the "must-do" priorities and parameters and communicate them precisely in the RFP. Then, it is up to the bidder to respond with details about fulfilling all requirements.

Expecting to skip or circumvent this process is naïve at best. Again, solid procurement is common sense in

terms of transparency and public accountability, as well as clearly defining the terms of engagement for both parties. After all, when was the last time you were hired for a job without going through an extensive interview process? In exceptional circumstances, and I mean "exceptional" such as, but not exclusively, cases of a medical or healthcare crisis or where the knowledge base is so unique, there really is only one option. Even then, in these "exceptional;" cases we also must follow an approved standard that demonstrate how a particular case meets the "test" or pre-established and approved criteria as to why the case is exceptional and even have a third-party validate that the necessary criteria is met. The need to make meaningful progress is not a reason for "queue jumping" the usual procurement standards and process.

Let's all remember the ultimate judge of what criteria is appropriate is the test of the public opinion. When we fail in meeting that test, we all fail.

Independent audited assessments and the need for appropriate procurement practices are here to stay in ehealth and for good reason. Any lobbying to circumvent such jeopardizes the entire industry, risking future investment, our professional credibility and more. It is now time to act like professionals and expect this to be a normal course of business as in other mature industries. It's time to quit licking our wounds, change our behaviours if necessary, move on and do the right thing. ●

Congratulations CPHIMS-CAs!

The following individuals recently earned the CPHIMS-CA credential, the professional credential for Canadian health informatics professionals. All "CPHIMS-CAs" are also listed on the COACH: Canada's Health Informatics Association website at www.coachorg.com. (The names are listed in alphabetical order by surname.)

Name	Location	Name	Location
Ian Brunskill	Toronto, ON	Nicki Cunningham	Toronto, ON
Chris Byczko	Toronto, ON	Julie Kim	Toronto, ON
Terri Cahill	Toronto, ON	Jason Lin	Toronto, ON
Sandra Cascadden	Halifax, NS	Vincent Ng	Toronto, ON
Javier Castellanos	Mississauga, ON	Harbir Singh	Mississauga, ON
Zee Hua Cheung	Toronto, ON	Russell Swaga	North York, ON

2009-2010 COACH Board of Directors www.coachorg.com

COACH BOARD

President & Board Chair

Linda Miller
Alberta Health and Wellness
eMail: linda.miller@gov.ab.ca

President-elect

Lydia Lee
University Health Network Toronto
eMail: lydia.lee@uhn.on.ca

Secretary-Treasurer

Heather Tabin
Manitoba eHealth
eMail: htabin@manitoba-ehealth.ca

Past-President

Shelagh Maloney
Canada Health Infoway
eMail: smaloney@infoway-inforoute.ca

Directors

Mike Barron – St. John's, NL
Neil Gardner – Regina, SK
Andre Kushniruk – Victoria, BC
Marion Lyver – Burlington, ON
Mike Rigo – Moffat, ON
Michael Whitt – Calgary, AB

COACH NATIONAL OFFICE

250 Consumers Road, Suite 301
Toronto, ON M2J 2V6
Tel: 416.494.9324
Toll Free: 1.888.253.8554

SENIOR STAFF

Chief Executive Officer

Don Newsham
eMail: dnewsham@coachorg.com

Executive Director, Operations

Shannon Bott
eMail: sbott@coachorg.com

Executive Director, CHIEF

Heather Jones
eMail: hjones@coachorg.com

Director, Programs

Alison Gardner
agardner@coachorg.com