



Brendan Seaton

Brendan Seaton is the President of ITAC Health in Toronto, Ontario.

A Most Challenging Year

How quickly things can change over the course of a year. As the year began, eHealth was the favoured child of governments wanting to reform their health care systems and stimulate their economies. By midyear, eHealth represented government waste and excess at its worst. Now, vindicated somewhat by a Federal Auditor General's report, eHealth is regaining some of the lost luster, with pundits challenging health care jurisdictions and the industry to get on with the job of modernizing our health care system.

The good news is that in spite of the media and political firestorms that raged over the summer, no one challenged the basic premise that eHealth was a critical component of a sustainable health care system. There was a lot of talk of a culture of entitlement, value for money, and the ethics of expense accounting. But the public and the media "got it". They understood that we could no longer afford a health system that doesn't take full advantage of information and communications technologies.

However, we can no longer take the public's trust for granted. Nor can we act with impunity, expecting that our actions will be above public scrutiny. In a publically funded health care system, we are all public servants. We are all held to account for the expenditure of public funds and for the delivery of results. We must act with the highest levels of integrity in delivering our products and services to the public.

I have been impressed by the maturity of the response of health care jurisdictions and the industry to last summer's events. Everyone has, without exception, acknowledged the weaknesses in our processes and has taken corrective action.

Every jurisdiction has tightened up its procurement practices, ensuring greater transparency and accountability. Industry, is stepping up to increased scrutiny of its billing practices and is embracing certification programs to ensure that its products and services are safe, private and will interoperate with a pan-Canadian EHR.

In some ways the summer eHealth crisis was a necessary and important mid-course correction. For years health care jurisdictions sought ways of being less bureaucratic and more entrepreneurial in their procurements – bypassing time-consuming governmental processes that were seen as barriers to the progress of eHealth initiatives. As it turns out, while the public, media and opposition parties were impatient for results, they weren't prepared to give agencies that spent government funds free reign.

If nothing else, the rules of the game have been clarified. We expect all public institutions, be they government departments, agencies or hospitals to be open, accountable and transparent, and to follow due process when managing public funds. We also expect companies doing business with public institutions to recognize and respect that they have a significant role to play in establishing and maintaining the public's trust.

If what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, then we go into the New Year very strong indeed. But our newfound strength will be soon tested as the fiscal situations of the Federal and Provincial Governments continue to deteriorate. As the bills come due on the government stimulus packages, competition for funding for all manner of public services will intensify. More than ever we will be called upon to demonstrate and justify our value to a sustainable health system.

I wouldn't underestimate the magnitude of this challenge. Most governments are forecasting deficits into the foreseeable future. While highly dependent on the speed and strength of the economic recovery, we can expect that continued belt-tightening will be the order of the day.

It will behoove both public and private sector organizations to collaborate as we have never collaborated before. It will be some time before the public and the media again give us the benefit of the doubt. We will need to demonstrate time and again that we can increase the efficiency of

the health system, provide greater access to health services, and improve health outcomes, while at the same time being open, honest and transparent in all of our business dealings.

While 2009 is not a year any of us would like to repeat; it has proven to be a watershed year that has altered our industry and how we do business. In time we may see it at the year in which health ICT in Canada (both public and private sectors) matured and the precursor to the inevitable successes of 2010 and beyond! ●

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