

Private clinic's web portal unlocks patient information, resulting in better care and cost savings

BY SCOTT SIMPSON, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 10, 2013



Dale Drewery and her husband David Harper use an iPad to track Drewery's medical records online outside St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver on Friday, May 10, 2013.

Photograph by: Jason Payne Jason Payne, Vancouver Sun

David Harper is a bit obsessed with the notion of good health.

He's a biologist with a PhD and two post-doctoral degrees, a kinesiology instructor at the University of the Fraser Valley, a member of the Sports Medicine Council of B.C., a personal health counsellor, author of a book on investing in biotechnology, president of a company — Pacific BioVentures — that provides consulting service to the biotech sector, and leads an active physical lifestyle.

Not surprisingly, when a private medical clinic in West Vancouver recently partnered with Telus to launch a pilot project of an online medical records service, Harper was an early adopter. So was his wife.

The clinic, Continuum Care Centre, provides family physicians, specialists, health care professionals and home care services to 15,000 patients. It was a pioneer in adopting electronic medical records a few years ago and its most recent innovation, in late January, is an Internet platform called Health eGateway. The new technology, an innovation of Telus Health, gives patients online access to their

own electronic medical records, allowing them — or their family caregiver — to do everything from check on the time of an appointment to double-checking prescription changes from their last doctor's visit via any Internet connection. It is the first medical practice in Canada to deliver the Telus Health program.

Originally, the company planned to introduce the service two years ago. But after Telus bought the company that created it, it received further refinements, such as the design of a secure communications link similar to what you'd expect when accessing your bank records from the Internet. Telus plans to offer online appointment booking soon, which is expected to reduce administration costs in the health care system.

So far, 500 Continuum patients have signed on — including several people who didn't own or know how to operate a computer when they bought the \$60-a-year service.

Lately, Harper has been getting his money's worth.

His wife, Dale Drewery, had open heart surgery in mid-April and is now recovering with the help of a regimen of medicines including anti-coagulants, which it can sometimes be difficult to put in balance.

"It all went well," Harper said. "I was able to follow up (through the portal) because she authorized me to have access to her report."

All of the information provided to the clinic goes into Drewery's medical record, which she and Harper can review at their leisure — you could, for example, check the records to measure the pace of recovery.

If that seems a bit redundant, consider that Drewery's medical records belong to her, not to her physicians, surgeons and nurses, yet it's only because she and Harper can review them through the portal that she has full-time access to the charts her caregivers rely on to track her health.

Or consider this — if you were caring for an elderly parent who requires a variety of medications or treatments, you could track things like home nursing visits, prescriptions and overall health assessments if you are concerned about the parent's capacity to manage all of it on their own.

Or this — if you go on vacation with someone with a known medical condition, you have immediate access to all of their health records and you can pass those directly to an emergency room doctor in the event of a sudden illness.

"I can actually go in and access the information, say, over the weekend when the office is closed," Harper said.

"I can go back to my vaccinations to 2002, all my medical records, current conditions. I can look at all the reports, my health history.

"What's great about this is that I cannot only monitor my own results ... but it also allows me to access my wife's information. And perhaps better still, we travel a lot.

"If we end up in Hawaii six months from now and she has some kind of incident, I can access her entire medical record within 10 seconds, and I can provide that to the medical practitioner and just say, 'There, you have everything you need to know.' "

What Continuum is attempting to do, Harper said, "is the future."

"With the (publicly funded) fee schedules that physicians work with, they have 10 minutes to work with a patient. It could be a pimple, it could be cancer," he said.

"People within the health care system have often said, 'If we are going to reinvent it, we wouldn't do it this way.' A lot of times diseases progress at a pace that exceeds the capacity of the system to keep up with it. It's concerning for patients."

Continuum believes better communication could get some of the backlog out of the system. Someone requiring only a nominal visit to renew a prescription, for example, could do that through email rather than an office visit and potentially free up time for someone with a more serious condition.

Dr. Bryce Kelpin, a general practitioner who is medical director for the clinic, said the project cost \$80,000 to get launched. That total includes marketing and website development, but not the cost for Telus to develop a secure online and mobile link-up so that patients could log in.

"This isn't something a two-doctor practice is going to undertake unless they get a lot more help with it ... so that it comes out of the Medical Services Plan."

As a measure of the effectiveness of using the Internet to reduce clinic operational costs, Kelpin noted four Continuum support staff work from home, and the money to finance the portal project came from saving the cost of office space for the home-based workers.

Kelpin dedicates a fair portion of his career to lobbying government to offer incentives for services such as the cost to a medical practice to manage electronic health records. He admits he's often frustrated.

Government policy, he said, lags the technology that could allow the medical system to deliver an array of cost-effective services to patients.

"If you're following a diabetic, they can see their lab work and I can see it. They can see their (blood sugar/insulin) trends and follow it graphically. They can be engaged in the process now."

Kelpin said it could take "years" for the province and the federal government to get up to speed, unless Continuum can demonstrate directly to doctors the value of the system it's introducing.

"I'm on the IT committee for the division of general practice here. We just had a presentation about a new computer platform — they're going to integrate (electronic records for) Vancouver Coastal Health, Fraser Health, and the provincial health authority, which is fantastic.

"But it's \$200 million over two to three years and the bottom line is that there is no effort to communicate electronically with the GPs in the community — which is where 90 per cent of their information is. This is only at hospitals.

“So we are looking at doing an end run around this. When my patient shows up in emergency, they can say to the emergency doctor, ‘What’s your email, what’s the fax number for providing my medical history to you right now?’ and do it from their iPhone, their iPad, right there in emergency or before they arrive.

“That emergency doc is going to look at that and say ‘How come we don’t have that?’ ”

While governments have come around to the idea of supporting the payment of fees for medical practices that shift into electronic medical records, Continuum can’t yet bill the government for development of the portal.

“When you’re at the leading edge of this, (the fee codes) don’t exist yet,” Kelpin said.

“There will be patients who will pay privately for this service. Then there will be other patients who are chronically ill and hopefully the government will want to pay for their portal because it’s really useful to them to have that information in a portable format and allow us to integrate with them online.

“We want to give this information so that they can have better care that way.”

He believes that as more doctors shift into offering online access, the public’s reaction will be that it’s about time the opportunity presented itself.

“As patients start to get access to that, they will say, ‘Wow this is really great. This is like every other part of my life. Now medicine is finally getting there and now I want more.’ “

“We have to be concerned with the cost — it’s obviously going to take us more time to do things online, but I think ultimately there is a savings to the system if (some patients) are not being seen in the office.”

Another potential money saver is that patients can use the portal to take measures to improve their own care, he said.

“My patients have already been coming in who are online with their Health eGateway and they’re saying to me, ‘Well, what about this?’ and adding things or suggesting changes to their records. This is fantastic because now the patient is correcting things that may not be on the record — so we’ve got a more accurate record now.”

Dr. Brendan Byrne, who founded an electronic medical-records company, Wolf Medical, that was purchased by Telus Health in the development of this system, thinks greater patient access is “long overdue.” Telus has invested more than \$1 billion over the past five years to move into a position of national leadership in electronic health care systems.

“To actually get this out into production took a while,” Byrne said. “A big part of that is developing something that’s easy for the clinics to on-board their patients with, that works for the practitioners, and works for the patients.

"It taps into something that's such a big issue right now, which is access to primary care, access to health care. What we are trying to do with the portal is extend the doctor's office through a secure connection on the Internet."

Byrne believes the online patient service, in particular, will lead to better care for those who join it.

"A lot of health care encounters are incredibly brief. Think about somebody who is on seven medications. The doctor makes two or three adjustments. What are the chances that person actually is going to successfully absorb all of those changes from just a verbal interaction with a doctor? Having the ability to go online and say, 'OK, now take these pills twice a day,' becomes huge.

"The other thing you find all the time is that if your mom or your dad is older and has medication changes and they don't really remember them, it at least gives you custodian access to their records and you are able to at least understand what they're on."

Byrne is amazed that there's such a disparity between the availability of financial and health information.

"Health information is by law the patient's, yet the mechanisms to share that information, while they are legally there are practically not there," he said.

"It's quite onerous to request your own file. You end up getting it photocopied and you can be charged per page and so forth.

"Patients should be better informed — we're better informed about so many other things, why wouldn't we be better informed about health care?"

Telus describes the Continuum portal "version one" of its system.

"It has all the privacy and security components it needs. It's actually very similar to the way banks do it. It's completely built on top of the Telus infrastructure, so it has a great foundation," Byrne said.

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