Healthcare transformation: spotlight on Quebec

Quebec healthcare is in the midst of sweeping and dramatic changes. As in other parts of Canada, Quebec is facing provincial and financial imperatives to drive new system efficiencies and deliver a new standard of care. At the same time, digital health technology is maturing and presents important opportunities to streamline clinical workflow and facilitate higher engagement from patients in managing their own healthcare more fully.

As we learned from the recent CROP survey, Quebecers are highly receptive to embracing digital healthcare and conditions are aligned to start seeing real change.

A focus on costs

In the Spring of 2014, the election of a new majority government saw the start of a review of provincial programs, seeking ways to streamline Quebec’s finances and cut $3 billion to balance the budget over the next two years. While Quebec’s per capita healthcare spend is lower than the national average for several years, healthcare has represented a significant and increasing proportion of provincial spending as it does throughout the rest of Canada. As such, healthcare is a prime target for reform.

Current changes are aimed at streamlining administrative costs and inciting institutions as well as healthcare professionals to demonstrate greater efficiency. What is not yet clear is how the government’s choices in addressing cost issues will impact other important concerns facing Quebecers, such as access to care and improved care coordination – both of which are strongly enabled with health information technology (IT).

These issues are also of concern to healthcare decision-makers. In December 2014, health authorities, healthcare providers, and researchers of Quebec City came together at the eighth annual Forum de l’industrie de la santé de Québec (FISQ) to reflect on how to drive increased system effectiveness. It was clear that there is a shared passion and momentum throughout this tightly knit community to make change happen.
Digital healthcare: the essential enabler

In light of Quebec’s transformation agenda, the role of digital healthcare provision becomes a central consideration and raises two questions of particular interest:

- Are the people of Quebec ready for change?
- Are Quebec healthcare practitioners ready?

**Ninety per cent of Quebecers want to communicate with their doctor by email.**

Those surveyed indicated many compelling reasons to connect electronically that include:

- **78%** scheduling appointments online
- **68%** receiving advice concerning new health problems
- **67%** reviewing lab results

Quebecers also said that electronic access would:

- **94%** cut down the number of non-critical emergency room visits and walk-in clinics
- **93%** enable a quick response from a health professional
- **90%** reduce visits to the family doctor
- **90%** play an active part in increasing the efficiency of the healthcare system

**Digital healthcare: are Quebecers ready?**

In November 2014, TELUS Health, in partnership with Diabetes Quebec, commissioned Montreal-based research agency, CROP, to undertake a study to measure the general perception of Quebecers toward information technology in healthcare and gauge their readiness for change. What we learned from the 1,000 Quebecers who participated in the study is that while they are relatively satisfied with the health system in terms of personnel and the care they receive, few are satisfied with access to care (58%) and system efficiency in general (50%).

**Quebecers want an active role**

We also learned that they are ready to take a more active role in managing their health through the use of digital tools. On average, more than two-thirds of those surveyed are interested in creating a personal electronic health file. Furthermore, among respondents with chronic diseases, 85% say that access to an electronic health record would give them the opportunity to record biometric measurements such as blood pressure, blood sugar levels and heart rate, as well as the option to share their personal file with a family caregiver.

**An emerging consumer mindset**

Consumers are accustomed to having easy digital access to conduct most of their day-to-day activities. Banking, telework, booking travel, shopping online; all are well-established in the digital domain. Yet, scheduling healthcare appointments, refilling prescriptions, or booking a consultation with a physician who is equipped with an electronic medical record (EMR) system is scarce. As the CROP survey results indicate, a strong consumer mindset is emerging relative to digital health in Quebec.

Technologies to enable digital healthcare exist today; however, when it comes to IT adoption in the health sector on a national basis, Canada is only now starting to reach levels that are comparable to other G7 countries.
Implications for the rest of Canada

- Without increased and consistent adoption of health IT systems in all provinces, the disparity of care provision across the country will intensify.
- Canadian citizens have come to expect a patient-centred, seamless digital healthcare experience as they have in other aspects of day-to-day life. While the vision of patient-centred healthcare is evolving throughout the care continuum, it remains siloed with little-to-no continuity among providers.
- Budget cuts that target health IT and digitization efforts will ultimately hinder Canada’s progress in delivering safer, more efficient and cost-effective care.
- Ongoing change management is integral to successful health IT implementation.

Are Quebec physicians ready for digital healthcare?

While adoption of digital tools has reached a tipping point across the country, Quebec is lagging. More than one-third of physicians still use purely paper-based systems. While various factors contribute to Quebec’s low health IT adoption rates, 73% of Quebec physicians cite lack of availability to digital tools due to decisions of their hospital or physician group. Financial considerations play a big role. Quebec was the last of eight provinces to implement a program to incent EMR adoption, with the Programme québécois d’adoption du dossier medical electronique initiated in 2013.

Quebec physicians’ digital readiness

According to the 2014 National Physicians Survey, Quebec physicians are the most likely in Canada to implement electronic records in the next few years at 42%, suggesting a general acknowledgement that paper-based clinics are becoming outdated and that a move toward digital practice will be necessary.

By contrast, in Quebec’s current cost-cutting environment, physicians with paper-based clinics perceive going digital as a costly, time-consuming and significant undertaking. The upside value of improved clinic workflow and efficiency, not to mention the improved patient experience is therefore not fully understood.

As Quebec physicians are challenged by the government to improve their efficiencies both at a personal and at a clinic level, health IT can give them the tools to better organize their work. And, once level of health IT penetration will reach a tipping point, Quebecers can expect to experience better quality healthcare, and benefit from better collaboration between their various care providers.

Preventing healthcare inequity

The adoption of digital healthcare has proven to be a boon to clinical efficiency and quality of care. Across Canada, physicians are seeing a difference. Sixty-five per cent reported seeing better or much better quality of care since the implementation of electronic records, according to the 2014 National Physicians Survey.

In Quebec, as elsewhere, when clinics that have deployed EMRs showcase the value of their deployments, it is other physicians that will follow the lead.

As Quebec proceeds with dramatic changes to its health system, there is an opportunity to not only cut costs, but to incent the adoption of health IT and deliver new standards in terms of access to care and improved care coordination. The time is now to take measures to prevent an inequity in the level of care provided to Quebecers compared to the rest of Canada.

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[1] National Health Expenditure Database, Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), 2011