Harnessing the power of technology involves rethinking how we approach medical records — from consistency of patient information and accuracy, to improved communication, convenience and much more.

More effective and efficient healthcare delivery is about taking every advantage of the many benefits technology can offer — particularly in a country as geographically diverse as Canada. A prime example is the Northwest Territories (NWT), an area twice the size of France, with 42,000 people distributed across 33 communities.

Recently, success in the community of Fort Resolution, NWT (population 474) is revealing the full extent of what’s possible with the right technology and a willingness to embrace the benefits of the digital age. Thanks to an initiative involving the Health and Social Services department of the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) and TELUS Health, the GNWT’s electronic medical record (EMR) management system went live in Fort Resolution in 2015. In so doing, this tiny community situated just south of Great Slave Lake — the oldest settlement in the Territories — unofficially became the first fully digital remote nursing station in the country, and a symbol of the future of healthcare delivery.

Record-keeping in the digital era
As part of the territorial EMR, Fort Resolution’s patient records are in electronic form — meaning the exact same record and information are available to a care team member in Yellowknife or any other part of the territory. So too are physician notes, labs, medications, allergies, the patient’s medical history and more. Thanks to the territorial EMR, complete patient records are the new norm — records that can be easily accessed and shared between and among practitioners.

Jacqueline DeCoutere, manager of health operations with Health and Social Services for two northern communities (Fort Resolution and the Lutsel K’e), says the shift to digital is creating a system with “one person, one record,” where previously a patient might have had two, three (or more) records in different geographic locations. As a result, continuity of care is that much easier in a place where the population of medical providers can be somewhat transient. In other words, DeCoutere says having the most up-to-date information on each patient in a single place is of great benefit to health practitioners and patients alike.

EMR use benefits remote communities
“Use of electronic medical records and e-consultation is making a real difference in Fort Resolution and the broader region,” says Dr. Ewan Affleck, chief medical information officer with the GNWT.

“The system is centred around the patient, which has two distinct advantages. The first is that we now have a single database from which we can drive care based on analytics. The other is that we can use it as a communication tool so a patient’s circle of caregivers can talk to each other — wherever the patient might happen to be.” In other words, practitioners can correspond about or discuss the particulars of a patient’s case from two different locations with the same information at their fingertips.

Affleck says having information in one place means, “we're actually designing our health information around the patient, which will improve the quality of care [Health and Social Services] can provide.” Meanwhile, being able to communicate remotely using TELUS Health EMR is especially valuable when distances are great, such as the 627 kilometres that separate Fort Resolution and Yellowknife.
In communities across the Northwest Territories, use of EMR represents an opportunity for huge savings in time, travel and convenience for the patient, and costs for the overall health care system. A reduction of these costs should happen thanks to the use of technology and virtual consultation (also known as telemedicine or a video visit). Accordingly, Affleck says, “you begin to consider the cost of transferring the patient.” With 72 per cent of medical travel trips taken within the Territories, according to a GNWT Health and Social Services 2015-16 business plan, a similar reduction in travel and subsequently costs thanks to use of the territorial EMR would represent significant savings.

The power of information

Affleck believes having more reliable information can also allow for better understanding of broader health issues and trends. “If you’re a patient in Fort Resolution, or a remote community in Canada, you often don’t have continuity of care with the same health care providers as they tend to come and go on a locum basis,” he says. “As a result, having informational continuity becomes even more important. By measuring key health indicators using the EMR, we can begin to see the bigger picture — say, everyone in Fort Resolution who is a diabetic or has hypertension, and can assess their current health status. We can then set and follow parameters of care, as well as standards, and measure for improvements in these key indicators.”

Ultimately, Affleck says working with electronic patient-driven information can yield real dividends for the Fort Resolution community and the region. “This will improve the quality of care we’re able to provide and, in turn, allow us to do things more efficiently, effectively, equitably and safely, in a timelier and more patient-centric fashion — the parameters of quality care.”

Fort Resolution: the backstory

The path to a fully digitally remote nursing station in Fort Resolution began in 2004 with the goal of implementing a single digital charting system for all patients on an out-patient basis in the Northwest Territories.

Back more than a decade ago, when the seeds of what would become the digital nursing station in Fort Resolution were sown, “This was a place we wanted to get to with the project,” Affleck says. “We’ve learned how to implement and support an electronic charting system in a small, remote community with a transient workforce. Now, that has been accomplished.”

In addition, Affleck says some specialist services are already part of the system, including orthopedic surgery and pediatrics, while others (such as ENT, ear, nose and throat) are being integrated.

With Fort Resolution and the two centres it refers patients to (Yellowknife and Hay River) all on territorial EMR, the benefits of electronic records and record-keeping are giving everyone a real-time glimpse into the digital future of healthcare in the Territories.
Looking to the Future

The TELUS Health vision for healthcare is a system that enables timely, convenient, accessible and effective patient experiences. In support of this vision, the TELUS Health mission is to turn information into better health outcomes by providing applications and services that connect patients, providers and insurers through the TELUS Health platform. It’s about seeing clinics that are technology-enabled, collaborative, accessible and secure.

It’s what TELUS Health calls The Future-Friendly Clinic.

It’s a clinic that has already adopted technology solutions such as EMR, mobility, high-speed and managed Internet, fibre — and even Wi-Fi in the waiting room. It’s a place where technology and communications infrastructure support everything a practitioner does to deliver patient care, where infrastructure decisions directly impact how care is administered, delivered and experienced by both patient and practitioner.

Improving the healthcare experience for patients means making the practice of healthcare better for everyone who serves the patient, namely the doctors, specialists, allied healthcare professionals, pharmacists, insurers, lab techs and others who all need real-time information at the point of care.

About TELUS Health

TELUS Health is a leader in telehomecare, electronic medical and health records, consumer health, benefits management and pharmacy management. TELUS Health solutions give health authorities, providers, physicians, patients and consumers the power to turn information into better health outcomes.

For more information about TELUS Health, visit telushealth.com