



News Article

Susan Kadis, M.P., Thornhill

Why e-Health Matters?

Susan Kadis, M.P. Thornhill

The Hill Times – Monday, January 22, 2007

All Canadians understand how important infrastructure is to our ability to move people and products from one place to another. Less understood, but just as important to the improvement of health care in Canada, is developing an effective *infostructure* – the e-health technology that will help build a more responsive, sustainable and equitable health care system.

The federal government has an important leadership role to play putting in place the technology required to renew our health care system and build a pan-Canadian health information network. Better technology can improve communications among health care professionals and patients, increase productivity of health care workers and facilities, provide access to health care services in remote and rural areas, and identify and plan for health trends as they develop.

The previous Federal Liberal government understood this and acted on it. In 2001 a Liberal government, created Canada Health Infoway. Started with an initial investment of \$1.2 billion, the project developed electronic health information systems with nationally compatible standards and communication technologies that will provide health care professionals and patients with easy and immediate access to test results, medical histories and medication profiles. The goal of Canada Health Infoway is to fully implement electronically compatible health records for 50 per cent of Canadians by the end of 2009, but this will not happen without continued

leadership and accelerated financial commitment from all partners. Successful implementation of electronic health records is a big part of reducing wait times by increasing productivity through efficiency and by ensuring that the right information is in the right hands at the right time.

Streamlined health technology offers one of the biggest potential cost savings to our health care system. Since 2001, Canada Health Infoway has invested in over 125 projects that have been completed or are underway including tele-health, electronic patient registries, diagnostic imaging, electronic health records and health surveillance. Recently, the Infoway has also moved forward in its new role as the nationwide e-health standards co-ordinator, working together with the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) for the advancement of health information technology standards. Creating and maintaining standards for e-health is critical to ensuring the smooth interaction of e-health technologies nationally and internationally.

Another important player in the e-health technology sector has been CANAIRE, a federal agency created to speed up the development and implementation of the internet network across the country. CANAIRE has already been instrumental in improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of Tele-health, and will play a critical role in ensuring that the e-health has sufficient security, storage, satellite, and wireless linkages to operate effectively.

One example of the benefits of e-health is the Regional Clinical Oncology Information Highway Project, a \$3.8 million pilot project in the Maurice Region and Centre de Quebec. The project enabled the sharing of electronic health records from doctors, hospitals and community-based programs for the treatment of breast cancer. This kind of information sharing helped better co-ordinate care management, providing for faster decision-making on treatment and test results and allowing patients to make fewer visits to care centres.

Key to success is the federal government working in partnership with the provinces to accelerate the development of healthcare technology, as it did with the Canadian Health Infostructure Partnership Program (CHIPP) between 2000 and 2002. This program funded a tele-health network for under-serviced communities

in British Columbia, developed a partnership with Health Infostructure Atlantic (HIA), and helped build a province wide common client registry in PEI.

The transformative benefits of e-health for the Canadian healthcare system are important pieces of the puzzle in the evolution of our national public medicare system. By supporting the adoption of e-health technologies, the federal government can improve the delivery of healthcare in Canada while supporting Canadian companies that are leading the way in health information technology.

Despite the fact that the previous government laid the foundation for a modern health information network, the Conservative government has refused to make the additional investments required to give national scope to these successful first steps. Instead, the government's work has been limited to offering small pilot projects, ignoring the need to build on progress already made, or the need to consult with provincial partners who are actually responsible for the delivery of services. This is no way to forge the future of health care in Canada. We need strong, collaborative leadership from the federal government, working in partnership with the provinces and territories, to build on the investments already made to strengthen our public health care system.

Unfortunately, what we have is a Health Minister who remains silent on one of his government's top five policy priorities, and a Prime Minister who is more interested in photo ops and piecemeal solutions than he is in taking the action necessary to preserve Canada's publicly-funded system of healthcare.