

Towards integrated and coherent health information systems for performance monitoring: the Canadian experience

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ABSTRACT

Canada has a great deal of excellent health data; but we are still striving for integrated and coherent information systems in the health domain. There is growing appreciation that the proper kinds of health information systems can

- significantly improve patient care,
- support much more effective management of the delivery of health services, and
- provide the foundations for major new insights into the determinants of population health.

This paper briefly traces the evolution of these ideas over the past decade, describes the leading current health information initiatives, and links them together into the vision of Canada's "health infoway".

Several key concepts form the core of health information developments in Canada:

- a parsimonious set of indicators, accessible to the general public via periodic reports, as part of the health sector's accountability to its publics;
- a standardized electronic health or patient record, accessible on a need-to-know basis, both for immediate patient care, and in anonymized form for management information and research;
- statistical frameworks which not only provide the data that roll up into summary indicators, but also an underlying richness of detail to allow interested parties to "drill down" to understand the "why" of various trends or patterns;
- an appreciation of the institutional diversity of health care and governance within Canada, which requires emphases on common standards and inter-operability, with much data and information focused on local needs, but at the same time being centrally accessible; and
- a sensitivity to international developments, for example in indicators of health system performance, and the benefits of sufficient comparability of health information so Canada can learn from the experiences of other countries.

The paper concludes with an assessment of which aspects of Canadian experience in health information are likely unique to Canada, and those where greater emphasis on cross-national learning and development may be warranted.