

Jim Carroll

IT and healthcare: more than just a marriage of convenience

When IT professionals talk about information technology and healthcare, it's usually in the context of hospital information systems.

That's too bad, since such a narrow focus clouds the biggest opportunity emerging in the union of IT and healthcare.

Don't get me wrong — no one denies the existence of huge possibilities for IT in the world of healthcare. Some estimates indicate that upwards of $10 billion is spent in the U.S. healthcare system simply moving paper around. Certainly there is lots of room to deploy sophisticated systems to streamline the way information is processed in the industry.

And yet to me, mixing the Internet and healthcare presents an even bigger opportunity than the simple processing of information. I believe we are on the dawn of a new era, one that allows us a unique chance to use technology to reinvent the healthcare system.

I'm rather befuddled by the national dialogue focused on the crisis in our healthcare system. Why? Because for all the talk, I've never heard a politician, senior healthcare executive, leading medical professional or prominent healthcare official state the obvious. No one has said that given that patients have changed their approach to healthcare because of the Internet, we should include that reality when we reinvent the system.

People are now taking an aggressive interest in their healthcare. They use online research to obtain information on medical issues, and they are interested in discussing these issues with their doctors. They want to better understand alternatives, issues and treatments.

This new reality can help to reduce the demand on precious healthcare resources. An enlightened patient is less likely to run back to their doctor's office for every minor complaint. Add up these wasted visits and you've got a lot of excess cost in the system.

In other words, let's make Internet-based patient self-education a key part of our healthcare system. When I leave the doctor's office, I shouldn't just get a prescription — I should get a detailed list of healthcare resources on the Net as part of my treatment.

Such thinking may seem far-fetched to some, but it takes advantage of the role the Internet has come to play in our lives. It often comes as a surprise to many people that health information is one of the most popular topics on the Internet. But it shouldn't. In the last few years we have seen a subtle but distinct shift in the way that people manage health issues.

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I consistently find myself in the midst of this change. In just the last few days, we had an alarming medical circumstance with a family member, a suspected "mini-stroke." There was the usual dialogue with the doctor at the hospital, but for him, we were different.

I spent a great deal of time researching the issue and provided my wife with a massive list of issues, questions and concerns for the attending physician. At one point, while my wife was asking him a series of detailed, hard-hitting questions about the diagnosis and treatment, he paused and asked if she was a nurse.

No, she stated, just a healthcare consumer who has taken the time to research the situation. Why, she asked next, was he not following the recommended course of action from the American Stroke Foundation?

As things turned out, the doctor changed his planned course of action based upon our involvement. It soon became clear that we had helped make sure the right things were being done. This type of involvement is critical in today's healthcare system, where many medical professionals are under strain, overworked and under-resourced, and often unable to pay full attention to every single case.

With the Internet, the centuries-old relationship between doctor and patient is changing, allowing people to take a far more aggressive role in their health circumstances. Patients are now more likely to question their physician about advice given them or to use the Internet to enhance understanding. By doing so, they are better able to manage their overall healthcare circumstances, which leads, over time, to a reduction in demand on resources.

Of course, many medical professionals are alarmed by this behavioural change, and often rightly so. There is a stunning amount of fraudulent and misleading healthcare information online. Any doctor will tell you it's sometimes very difficult to dissuade patients from believing something they have read on the Internet.

Yet, even though there is some bad medical information online, there are also a lot of useful, high-quality resources. Some feel the medical community and healthcare industry has an obligation to help patients use the Internet intelligently. And the thinking is that if there are more folks like us, taking the time to understand the issues, then patients will receive better results.

Science fiction? No. This trend is particularly advanced in the United States, where a number of health management organizations (HMOs) and medical insurance companies are rolling out sophisticated sites to help patients make the Internet a part of their healthcare.

United HealthCare, for example, is investing heavily to make sure its more than 4.6 million members nationwide use the Internet to access customized healthcare information relevant to their condition.

What does it all come down to? Massive change in the world of healthcare, and over time, a change in the way healthcare services are provided and delivered.

And this is what is so funny about the ongoing debate about the healthcare system in Canada. No one is talking about the opportunity that's staring us in the face. And yet, that shouldn't come as a surprise. Quite often, with any type of new technology, the IT community realizes the power and capability of the tools at our disposal long before the rest of the populace.

Which means, when it comes to IT and healthcare, we've yet to see the tip of the iceberg in the nature of the IT opportunity that exists. ◀◀

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Letter to the Editor

Thank you for the excellent feature articles, "Tuning into the world of iTV" and "Improving the odds for iTV" in your March, 2001 issue of *htc*.

As a production company focused on creating interactive content for the Internet, television and wireless convergence market, ExtendMedia appreciates your attention to highlighting the opportunities in the growing field of interactive television.

There is one point that we would like to clarify for your readers. The sentence, "ExtendMedia...recently closed up their major iTV production centre," is incorrect. While our company has recently experienced restructuring that has unfortunately resulted in staff reductions, our production centre is still very much alive and operating. ExtendMedia is continuing to deliver on our commitment to create compelling interactive entertainment experiences for our clients across the U.S. and Canada.

Your readers should continue to feel confident that ExtendMedia is a leader in the digital convergence space and is committed to furthering the industry across North America.

Keith Kocho
President & CEO
ExtendMedia