

CANADIAN Healthcare Technology

Where should electronic health records reside?

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One of the more heated debates currently taking place is that of data management as it applies to physician Electronic Medical Records. Where should EMR data reside? Centrally in large government or health region repositories, or locally in individual servers in physician offices?

In the ideal world, all healthcare information would be securely managed and accessible on a need-to-know basis to appropriate individuals, irrespective of location.

There would be no breaches of security, privacy would always be protected and providers would have accurate and relevant information immediately available at the point-of-care. However we do not live in this 'ideal' world. Despite our best intentions, privacy is not always protected, breaches in security are not uncommon and the linking of information databases provides a mechanism for the existence of 'ghost' medical records that are duplicates of the original information and may reside in multiple virtual locations.

Many potential privacy breaches may be unrelated to limitations in technology; instead they may be linked to human

behavior characteristics such as lax password management or a failure to adhere to best practices when installing a firewall or implementing virus protection software.

Having the right mix of policy and procedure as a mechanism to protect privacy is a cornerstone of any Healthcare IT project dealing with sensitive patient information. Unfortunately, much of this policy is currently in an early stage of evolution.

Despite the desire to push ahead and implement IT solutions, the occurrence of a major privacy breach has the potential not just to sideline a project while the issue is addressed, but could potentially set back years of development and cost millions of dollars. It is wise to proceed with caution and understand the risks.

From the physician perspective there are a number of players in the privacy equation. It is important that the role of each is understood in every Canadian province and territory. In a very simplified form I will attempt to explain the func-

tions of some important parties in the context of the medical record:

- The health region and ministry of health provide the tools to access healthcare information. They are responsible for ensuring that health care information is securely stored and appropriately accessed;
- The provincial licensing body (College of Physicians and Surgeons) establishes and enforces the rules that govern the way that physicians provide care in order to ensure the public is protected;
- The provincial medical association has an advocacy role to support and assist physicians by negotiating on the physician's behalf and providing input into policy development. Support may extend to the provision of education programs to ensure physicians are well prepared for a changing environment;
- The university link is one that is not often explored, but health policy development depends on access to accurate information on health outcomes. It's important to ensure that any electronic patient records used in outcomes research remain anonymous.

Now, ask any physician whether they believe patient information should be reside in central locations or locally in that physician's office and you will understand why there is such heated debate.



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