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Quebec starts province-wide EHR project

BY JERRY ZEIDENBERG

QUEBEC CITY – The province of Quebec has officially started its \$560 million Dossier de santé project, an electronic health record network that will allow 95,000 doctors, nurses and allied healthcare professionals to access the medical charts of their patients using a single viewing system.

The project kicked-off in May with a pilot system at a clinic in Quebec City and will roll out across the province over the next three years.

“It’s the first time in Quebec that we’ll have a complete, longitudinal view of the patient’s medical history,” commented Dr. Guy Bisson, senior clinical advisor to the Dossier’s project director, and a former professor of medicine at the University of Sherbrooke.

Dr. Bisson is currently the medical lead for xwave, which won the contract as systems integrator and project leader of Quebec’s Dossier.

Dr. Bisson explained that the Dossier de santé du Québec (DSQ) project intends to integrate existing sources of data – initially from labs, pharmacies and the provincial drug plan, and diagnostic labs – making the records available to authorized caregivers through a web-based portal.

It’s a huge integration project, and one that involves many first-of-its-kind technologies and approaches.

“This project is a milestone for Canada, as Quebec will be the first to implement the Infoway architectural blueprint on a large scale,” commented Gary Folker, managing director, business development, at xwave. “It’s also the first provincial project to use HL7 v3 messaging,” he added, referring to the leading-edge standard for communicating health data files.

For its part, xwave stands to earn \$109 million as the systems integrator and project manager. Its partners include Orion, which is supplying the viewer software for the system; Oracle, whose Health Transaction Base (HTB) will be used for the first time in Canada in a large-scale project; and Bell Canada, which is providing infrastructure management and training.

Dr. Bisson noted that Quebec has a unique legal environment that requires the provincial health-record system to be created in a way that’s different from other jurisdictions in Canada.

“In Quebec, you need explicit consent of the patient to share information electronically,” he said.

As well, the data itself must be stored locally in one of 18 regions across the province. For that reason, the Dossier project is building 18 different repositories – information from various sources will be uploaded into these repositories on an ongoing basis. For example, information from 126 labs across the province will flow into the appropriate regional repository.

Nadeem Ahmed, xwave’s managing director, healthcare, said the Quebec project is likely the most complex provincial

project has achieved buy-in and an enthusiastic response from the doctors. “In the past, when people talked about installing computerized records in clinics, doctors would ask, ‘why?’” said Dr. Bisson. “Now, they’re asking when can they get more functionality, like lab and diagnostic imaging.”

Dr. Bisson observed that a great deal of work has gone into customizing Orion’s web-based viewer into a format that Quebec physicians and care-givers are comfortable using. Meetings have been held to determine the types of views and information that Quebec physicians want to appear automatically, and which types of data could be accessed with subsequent clicks of a mouse.

As a guiding principle, the system has been “organized from summary to detail,” with the most important information most easily accessible, he said.

Additionally, the user can further define the view, according to how he or she likes to see information.

Dr. Bisson noted that in the initial phases, the system will provide information only, and won’t have the workflow capabilities found in some electronic health record solutions. It will offer fast access to information, but the process must be initiated by the physician or care-giver. Unusual results, for example, won’t automatically be sent to caregivers – although that functionality could be built into the system in the future.

On a related front, xwave is formulating ways of including consumers in its EHR solutions, to accommodate the rising interest in personal health records (PHR).

“Consumerism is here to stay,” commented Folker. “We know there are benefits from having the patient involved in self-care. Getting the patient involved often leads to earlier detection and treatment of problems.” According to Quebec’s Ministry of Health and Social Services, the implementation of the Québec EHR is expected to bring three main benefits – improved healthcare quality, better access to services, and increased productivity among healthcare professionals, while ensuring respect for privacy and the protection of personal information.



Gary Folker



Nadeem Ahmed

system to be launched in Canada. “It’s complex not only in terms of size, but also because of the special legal environment, the differing languages, and the challenges of integrating a diverse infrastructure.”

The initial site involves five general practitioners, as well as nurses and allied health professionals. In September, another clinic will be added – together 120 clinicians will be using the pilot system, which at that time will offer medication information, lab results and immunization data.

The province is currently creating a Quebec-wide diagnostic imaging network – when the DI repositories are established, interfaces will be created to enable physicians to access medical images. It’s expected that this will occur in mid-2009.

Already, commented Dr. Bisson, the pilot