

YOUR HEALTH

A JOINT VENTURE WITH AMGEN



Dr. Clive Ward-Able, left, Amgen Canada Inc.; Dianne Carmichael, UHN Solutions.



Patients hold the key to a sustainable medical system

Securing a future for health care

While Canada's universal health care system is believed to be among the best in the world, there is mounting evidence suggesting a system slowly losing touch with patients and ill-prepared for the influx of an aging population suffering from complex, chronic conditions, according to a report by the Conference Board of Canada. The 2012 report says that before the system can be improved these issues must be faced head-on.

According to recent projections, health care will consume 80% of provincial budgets by 2030; chronic conditions will represent more than 70% of those expenditures. Although Canada spends more than most developed countries on health care, according to a 2010 study by the Commonwealth Fund, the system is among the least effective, least efficient, least timely and least patient-centred of the 11 countries surveyed.

"Our aging population is increasingly suffering from multiple chronic conditions and an increasing appetite for technology — a world view our 20th century medical model did not conceive of. Historically, health care evolved from an acute-based system and we are now seeing a paradigm shift to a patient-centred model. Going forward we need to focus on engagement, prevention, wellness and self-management of chronic disease," says Dianne Carmichael, founder and general manager of UHN Solutions at University Health Network in Toronto, Canada's largest network of research hospitals. "We need to transform the system to ensure its

sustainability for generations to come."

The solution lies with patients, she believes, who can be an untapped human resource in the fight against chronic disease. Recent studies have shown that most patients want to participate in their own care and would be willing to take part in wellness programs, she says. Proper patient engagement, Carmichael adds, could positively impact outcomes and help reduce the current 40% of patients who fail to adhere to the treatment or lifestyle changes that are necessary for improved health.

"Patients and providers are not always communicating as well as they could. Patients often lack an understanding of medical jargon or are overwhelmed by a profound diagnosis, while providers often lack the extra time necessary to

bridge the gap. One-half to four-fifths of medical information is forgotten instantly by patients and what they do remember is often recalled incorrectly. Poor engagement, non-adherence to recommendations, and lack of self-management result in poor outcomes, additional costs to the system, and can add a level of frustration between doctor and patient."

She notes that technology could transform the way patients and physicians communicate today and be the cornerstone of a participatory model that can bring sustainability to health care.

While Canadians shop, bank,

learn and connect online, the health care system still relies on fax machines, telephones and brief in-office meetings to exchange information. Online and mobile tools can help improve adherence to regimens, promote self-management and ultimately empower patients, says Carmichael.

"We have secure online banking and investing today using applications that can be similarly applied to health care outside of the institutional environment. From customer-relations management tools and mobile response technology for lifestyle tracking to Bluetooth-enabled devices for monitoring vital signs, embracing technology and empowering consumers will help manage costs, enhance relationships, support active communication and engagement, and lead to true participatory medicine."

Technology is also bringing with it the ability to understand the human biology and genetics of diseases, to highly characterize them, and to develop therapeutics specifically targeted to a patient, says Dr. Clive Ward-Able, executive director of research and development with Amgen Canada Inc.

The tracking of outcomes from treatment is a critically important component of research, he says. "Patients can be key collaborators in helping to gather the data necessary to understand the real-world effectiveness of treatments and therapies. Whether it is a tissue

sample for study, participation in clinical trials or real-time data feedback"

Linking this information and sharing it across the entire system, from researchers to physicians, brings a better understanding of how interactions work in the real-world and ultimately improves results. And it also points to more personalized medicine, where knowledgeable and informed patients can be more involved in decisions about their treatment, he says.

While technology and patient engagement are critical for the future of health care in Canada, cost remains an issue.

"There is no way yet to measure the value of innovation to the system and to patients, but those capabilities are under development," says Ward-Able. "Technology that will make that happen is imminent but continued support from all parties is needed to help understand the effectiveness of innovation in reaching desired outcomes in the real-world."

"Waiting for the system to change will take time that we don't have. We need to apply disruptive, unique thinking to help patients today," says Carmichael.

Public/private partnerships are one alternative. Corporations are motivated to ensure their employees are healthy and productive. Insurance companies are motivated as they are footing some of the bills. And health care providers are motivated by a need to improve patient outcomes.

"Partnerships offer a way to bring invested parties together to preserve something that is critically important to Canadians and to the Canadian economy," she says.

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Beyond the waiting room

Wendy Sue Swanson is a Seattle-based pediatrician, the mother of two young boys, author of the SeattleMama-Doc blog, and an active social media user. She considers online communication between physician and patient to be an invaluable addition to the hands-on medicine that is provided daily in doctor's offices around the globe.

Social media and online resources have allowed patients to become more informed and more empowered, and it requires health care to be more transparent. By participating online, she says, doctors can listen, learn, share, inform, curate and dispel misinformation that can be dispensed in chat rooms, forums and by other non-expert sources.

"We can teach patients where to go online and how to find science-based information, and encourage physicians to open communication channels so that office time is more productive and efficient," says Dr. Swanson.

A face-to-face meeting with a physician typically means phone calls to set up an appointment for some time in the future, waiting periods in the office, and eventually spending a few minutes talking about health concerns. Communication often stops after that, leaving patients with questions between appointments or when their condition changes. To get answers to their questions, they often search the Internet.

Twitter is the fastest-growing social network and Facebook has over one billion active users, but it's not only the millennials that are logging on: The fastest-growing demographic on Twitter is the 55 to 64 age group; on Facebook it's 45- to 54-year-olds.

"It's time for doctors to recognize that good information now exists online. It's where our patients are and where we need to be," says Dr. Swanson. "It's giving us the opportunity to change how we deliver information about health care."

Dr. Swanson blogs for the Seattle Children's Hospital weekly. She tweets often, posts on Facebook and is a LinkedIn user. She writes about vaccines, sudden infant death syndrome, car seats, toddlers and teens, and the personal experiences of being a mother, a patient and a caregiver.

"I have all of these tools at my fingertips. I can use them to see where myths are being created, state the facts, and allay fears. I can connect in a one-to-many format and engage in people's lives in the manner they choose. When they come to the office and

have learned from the information, we can move onto more important discussions."

Technology is taking the physician/patient relationship beyond the waiting room. It is changing the way that families receive care and bringing a more individualized approach to the doctor's office.

"While we don't have the capability just yet, my goal is to prove that an empowered and informed patient reduces health care costs and improves outcomes."

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It's time for doctors to recognize that good information exists online



Seattle-based pediatrician Wendy Sue Swanson is an advocate of physician-patient online communication.