Sault Ste. Marie Group Health Centre:
Big Success in a Small Community
Since 1997, all the health care providers at Group Health Centre (GHC) access a single electronic medical record for each patient. Instead of relying on mailing or faxing charts and lab results, providers can make decisions based on a complete picture of a patient’s health. Patient care at all the chronic disease management programs at the Group Health Centre has improved significantly as a result.”
Karen M. is a 56 year old woman who takes 30 medications a day to manage her nine chronic diseases. Fortunately for Karen, she doesn’t have to travel all over the city for her medical care.

She’s involved in an interdisciplinary practice that consolidates all the services she requires in one place. All her caregivers have instant access to consistent information about her condition at their fingertips. Moreover, she has access to her own medical records so she can participate actively in the management of her care. She is a patient at the Group Health Centre in Sault Ste. Marie.

“I love it,” Karen says. “Everything is in one place…all my parts are covered.”

This unique centre began in 1962, when 5000 steel workers went fund-raising door to door to provide health care services for their community.

Since the sixties, the Group Health Centre has grown – now treating not only the steel workers, but 62,000 of the 75,000 residents of Sault Ste. Marie. The Centre provides ambulatory care with diagnostic services; comprehensive integrated care with primary, secondary and other health care services.

The team includes doctors, nurses, nurse educators, physiotherapists, optometrists, kinesiologists, dietitians, and lab technicians. Lab facilities operate on site, as do programs designed specifically to support people with chronic health conditions like diabetes or congestive heart failure.

A thread knitting all of these providers together is the electronic medical record (EMR). Sault Ste. Marie’s Group Health Centre has the largest primary care electronic medical records system in the country.

And how did this come about?

There were a large number of health care providers caring for Group Health Centre patients, but while they had computerized appointment, billing
and registration systems, they were still relying on meetings and paper-based records to share patient information. Patients with multiple chronic conditions could slip between the cracks, because of limited access to consistent and complete information.

The team at the centre wanted to explore whether they could create a system that was more time-efficient, less costly, and more effective in terms of patient continuity of care. Several members of the team felt that electronic medical records were the solution. The Algoma District Medical Group (ADMG), which is an independent medical group at the GHC, supported the move to EMR and provided physicians to build interest in a transition to EMR – especially among the doctors themselves.

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Patient care at all the chronic disease management programs at the Group Health Centre, from diabetes to congestive heart failure to osteoporosis, has improved significantly as a result.

The changes begin instantly at intake for patients like Karen. Once assessed and a diagnosis made, the physician has immediate access to embedded best practice templates and clinical guidelines, based on complex algorithms to assist in treating chronic conditions. Karen’s treatment plan will be based on established best practices for her many chronic conditions. This is especially significant in the case of a patient like Karen, where several treatment plans and specialty care are required. Karen’s electronic record will be created and her chart will be flagged for recall, tests or further follow-up as appropriate. If she is diabetic and hypertensive, for example, the chart will be flagged for regular blood tests and medication reviews based on the diabetes best practice template in her EMR.

After intake and at all subsequent visits to the centre, Karen’s physician and all the other health care providers who work with her have automatic access to her complete medical history and to the appropriate clinical paths to follow. Karen is on many different medications for her multiple chronic conditions and sees the pharmacist on
a regular basis. He can automatically update her medication profile and then make a referral to another specialist in real time. Lab results are automatically transferred to each patient’s record and a prompt directs a doctor’s attention to the new information when the patient’s file is opened. All of the health care professionals who work with Karen also have access to her most current condition and medications.

The sophistication of the EMR file at the Group Health Centre in Sault Ste. Marie facilitates planned, proactive care. It’s a flexible, robust tool that helps the health care team work together and ensures continuity of care for the patients. According to Dr. Dan Fritz, ADMG Family Physician who is Director of the Anti-Coagulation Clinic, and founder of the Tobacco Cessation Program, better continuity of care means better health outcomes.

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Dr. Fritz also reports that EMR has streamlined his job so that he can devote more time to clinical work and less to administration.

“Having EMR is a huge advance. Take for example the diabetes template. I send it on, giving the diabetes clinic authority to follow medical directives, to make medication and insulin adjustments, to refer to dietitians, to refill strips for monitors… it takes me 15 seconds to fill in. I can refer to counseling or other programs, and the EMR referrals are very simple to fill in. All the information is shared, which makes it much more efficient for the patients.”

EMR is also groundbreaking in tracking health outcomes. The Centre has created registries which accumulate disease-specific data and allow it to track trends and outcomes. They are aware at any point in time, of the number of patients being treated to target.

In addition, when the Centre wants to develop a new program or clinic, a committee called Health Promotion Initiatives first does a literature review. Next, the project is presented to the Joint Management Committee, which has representatives of both the Group Health Association (GHA) and the ADMG Board Executives, for approval, then a multidisciplinary team is established. That team designs and conducts a small pilot program using the EMR to measure outcomes and evaluate it. Based on the evaluation, they redesign the pilot and then test it again before launching a full-scale program.

Elizabeth Bodnar, GHA Senior Manager, Corporate Relations and
Privacy at the GHC says every HPI decision is made on the basis of evidence. Setting targets and then monitoring performance on an individual and population basis to achieve guideline compliance has changed medical practice in Sault Ste. Marie.

“We know whether a particular intervention, at the end of the year, really made a difference – and we can prove why.”

Cynthia MacKay, GHA Department Head of Algoma Diabetes Education and Care Program, feels that medical guidelines are followed more closely under the Group Health Centre model, and the result is seen in their outcomes. Participants in her diabetes program have an average 25-33% reduction in diabetes-related complications for people with Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes. Evidence like this has made Cynthia passionate about the EMR.

“I would not go back to the other way.”

Recently the Centre has begun two new innovative electronic initiatives. Patients like Karen can now access their own health records and medical information via an online patient portal. This promotes self-management by allowing patients to be more informed about and active in their own care. It also allows elderly patients to provide their children with access to their online records. They can then keep informed about their parent’s health.

Also for the first time, Group Health Centre has expanded access to the EMR beyond the on-site team. With patient consent, EMR can now be used to connect Group Health Centre team members with every community pharmacist in the city, in an initiative called EMRxtra. One feature, for example, allows pharmacists to communicate with physicians instantly over concerns about a medication, a natural remedy a patient may be taking, or to alert them to possible contraindications. EMRxtra is anticipated to integrate more medication reviews into patient care, informing physicians about every medication a patient is taking and whether they are following through on filling their prescriptions.

All of these factors together – the team, the EMR and its embedded clinical practice guidelines, the contiguity of care, particularly for patients with multiple chronic conditions, the commitment to clinical evidence, measuring outcomes and self-management – have led to a great many accolades. Group Health Centre has won four consecutive (five in total) National Best Practice Awards and...
was featured in Maclean’s Magazine as one of Canada’s top ten models of health care.  

But perhaps the greatest accolades for the Sault Ste. Marie Group Health Centre come from the patients who know first-hand what a difference it has made in their lives.  

Anna C. credits the Centre with saving her father’s life.  Domenico S. was a patient in the Congestive Heart Failure Program, which includes the largest nurse-run anticoagulation clinic in Canada. In the year before discovering the Congestive Heart Failure Program, Domenico was hospitalized eight times and in the emergency room every other week.  

After starting the CHF program, he was able to manage his health condition so successfully that he never went back to the hospital.  

He’s not alone. Since the launch of the Congestive Heart Failure program, there has been a 43% reduction in hospital readmission rates for Group Health Centre’s congestive heart failure patients.  

Like Domenico S.’s family, patient Karen M. also knows that access to this remarkable health centre is improving her multiple health conditions.  

“It gets me involved in my own care – I’ve got a say in it. My health, my care, my body. I love it.”

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