



JURISDICTIONAL SCAN

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES FOR VIRTUAL HEALTH CARE IN CANADA

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Jurisdictional Scan

Technology and Innovation in the Care of Older Adults

Introduction

Canada has been described as “the land of perpetual pilot projects”¹ and as lagging in the innovation space for the health care sector. Innovative models of care delivery are becoming more sought after with the aging demographic and growing preference for remaining in the home in later years of life². Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the feasibility and acceptability of virtual methods of care delivery, with Canada’s population expressing positive attitudes towards virtual options. Governments have made progress in recent years in expanding support for health technologies that have the potential to optimize care delivery.

This jurisdictional scan aimed to identify what Provinces and Territories are doing to incorporate digital health initiatives into their health care systems, what these innovative approaches are, and how jurisdictions are utilizing them to allow older adults to age in their own communities. This scan was conducted by reviewing publicly accessible Provincial and Territorial strategies, policies, and action plans with a focus on digital health. Additionally, aging strategies and action plans were reviewed to understand governments’ efforts to incorporate technology into care mechanisms targeting their aging populations.

For inclusion in this jurisdictional scan, health innovation and related technology falls into three categories: digital health records (DHR)³, telemedicine or virtual visits, and remote monitoring. Provinces and Territories are implementing these initiatives through a variety of governance structures, with some creating separate entities that run and manage the provincial efforts in conjunction with health ministries.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2691427/pdf/1801185.pdf>

² <https://www.marchofdimes.ca/en-ca/aboutus/newsroom/pr/Pages/MODC-Home-Modification-Survey.aspx>

³ Digital Health Record (DHR) will be used in this jurisdictional scan to refer to both the electronic health record (EHR) and electronic medical record (EMR)

Governance Structures for Health Technology

Provincial and Territorial Departments

Both British Columbia and Ontario had digital health policy infrastructure in place prior to the pandemic. British Columbia created the Office of Virtual Health in 2017, a division of the Provincial Health Services Authority. This office leads the virtual health initiatives of the health authority and works directly with clinical teams to incorporate virtual health into their services ¹.

Released in August of 2019 and later revised in December 2019, Ontario's Digital Health Playbook incorporated a Digital health service catalogue and Digital Health Policy Guidance document ². Briefly, the digital health service catalogue lists existing, tax-payer funded services and the policy guidance document ensures the interoperability and comparability of technologies across the province.

Ontario built upon the Digital Health Playbook in 2020, with a Digital Health Information Exchange policy ³ "In alignment with this strategic direction, the province's digital health infrastructure is also being improved to increase interoperability so that Ontarians, HCPs, and innovators may access and exchange trusted patient health information in a frictionless, reliable and consistent manner." p.4.



Figure 1 - Ontario Digital Health system since 2019

Further expanding on this initiative, a Digital First strategy was adopted in November of 2019. This included incorporating more virtual care options, more online bookings, expanded access to patient's own data, more avenues for frontline staff to access data online, and better data integration (with predictive analytics) ^{4, 5}. The Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN) ⁶ has become a part of Ontario

Health and focuses on incorporating virtual care into Ontario's health care system. The OTN has many services and resources for health care providers ⁷ as well as policies and guidelines ⁸ related to prescription taxes, goods and services procurement ⁹ and travel, meal and hospitality expenses ¹⁰. Additionally, an Ontario Virtual Care Clinic was established early in the COVID-19 pandemic to help patients access services; however, it has ceased operations effective December 8, 2021, as many healthcare professionals were able to return to providing safe, in-person visits ¹¹. The OTN continues to offer a virtual palliative care program, virtual services to manage COPD, and heart disease, and other services ¹².

Crown Corporations

In Provinces that do not have virtual/digital offices within health departments, several including Alberta, Saskatchewan, and New Brunswick have placed the management of digital strategies into the hands of crown corporations.

Alberta established the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Health System (PRHIS). It is a partnership between Alberta Innovates, a crown corporation, and Alberta Health Services, the province-wide health authority, and it works to "*strengthen health research capacity in Alberta by encouraging collaboration and partnerships between Alberta's academic institutions, health and clinician researchers, patients, and AHS operations to impact the health system.*" ¹³

In Saskatchewan, eHealth Saskatchewan is a Treasury Crown Corporation that oversees many aspects of technology in the province's health care system. This includes IT support, the management of their digital health record system, and overseeing health registries and vital statistics. As a result, they serve patients, health care providers, the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority ¹⁴.

Opportunities New Brunswick is a crown corporation, which serves to connect local and worldwide businesses with organizations that exist in the province. They have been integral in creating economic growth, which increased employment in many sectors by supporting innovation. They have a branch dedicated specifically to digital health and are well positioned to assist in the expansion of this sector ¹⁵.

Regional Health Authorities (RHAs)

Regional health authorities are dedicated to carrying out the best health care possible for the patients they represent, with most RHAs incorporating virtual visits as a part of their daily operations, and many having incorporated Zoom for health care professionals (See table/appendix). RHAs provide guidance for health care professionals and patients on understanding how virtual care is beneficial for both parties involved.

Historically, RHAs had been involved in overseeing some form of telemedicine. In this context, telemedicine was defined by having remote offices that patients can attend at locations that are convenient to them. There may or may not be a nurse present during the consultation, and a visit occurs with a specialist in another location that might not have been otherwise accessible by the patient. Telemedicine varies by province, but the most common services are for those who have COPD, heart failure, and diabetes. Saskatchewan Health Authority¹⁶ and the Northwest Territory's Health and Social Services¹⁷ oversee telehealth in those jurisdictions. In addition to this service, Saskatchewan has made use of TELUS and their home monitoring services to assist in monitoring conditions such as COPD, discharge home post-COVID admission, and heart conditions¹⁸. British Columbia has also incorporated services offered by TELUS into home monitoring programs¹⁹.

Current Technology Implementation in the Health Care System

Digital Health Records

Digital health records optimize access to patient health information in ready-made formats for healthcare practitioners²⁰. They also increase communication and collaboration among healthcare practitioners in seamless ways that allow patients to receive the healthcare they need. To harness these benefits, the Government of Canada created Canada Health Infoway in 2000, a not-for-profit organization to establish digital health records (DHRs) and virtual care. To date, Canada Health Infoway has received \$2.5 billion in funding from Health Canada to support their efforts²¹.

Leveraging the DHR concept, provincial governments and territories like Saskatchewan, Prince

Edward Island, Northwest Territories, and Alberta have created and are using DHRs to deliver health care in general and to older adults. The MySaskHealthRecord system allows patients to access their own information in Saskatchewan. On this platform a patient can see their clinical visit history, lab results, vaccine records, and medical imaging reports ²². For Prince Edward Island, the DHR platform allows for patient scheduling (including integration with the provincial Client Registry for demographic information), visit documentation (including clinical documents, lab results and diagnostic reports from the Clinical Information System), immunization extracts sent to the Immunization Registry, eReferrals, prescription management using PrescribeIT (since late 2021/2022)²³ and automated billing among other services ²⁴. For the Northwest Territories, its NWT HealthNet allows people to see their diagnostic imaging results, laboratory results, and other key medical and specialist reports ²⁵. In 2019, Newfoundland & Labrador announced a commitment to build a highly integrated Digital Health Record which allows patient health information to be available to providers in one place ⁴⁰. Alberta through its MyHealth Records system allows patients to access their health information including their immunization records for those received in Alberta including for COVID-19, laboratory results, and the medications record for medication received from community pharmacies in the province ²⁶. Furthermore, the province's DHR system is supporting people living with dementia ²⁷. Their DHR allows a person's information to be available for users across services, thereby eliminating the need to repeat the information many times over when visiting new specialists, which may be a challenge for those living with dementia ²⁸.

Telemedicine/virtual visits

There are a wide variety of virtual or tele-healthcare/telemedicine healthcare platforms that allow patients to access healthcare practitioners and services virtually. Older adults, some of whom may be dealing with many chronic health conditions, may benefit greatly from these options. COVID-19 has demonstrated how well these platforms can work when physical distancing measures are put in place. Because of this, there is a shift toward using telemedicine to deliver healthcare services in most jurisdictions. There are a variety of ways this is being carried out throughout the country.

The government of Ontario adopted a Digital First strategy in November of 2019. This included incorporating more virtual care options, more online bookings, expanded access to patients' own

data, more avenues for frontline staff to access data online, and better data integration^{29, 30}. Through the province's Ontario Health Teams (OHT), eReferral and eConsulting are currently being used³¹. The province of Québec uses telehealth clinical services³². This includes virtual homecare, telethrombolysis, teleassistance in wound care, teleassistance in post-hand replantation rehabilitation, and virtual meetings in oncology. Prince Edward Island uses a DHR system which allows healthcare practitioners to do video conferencing and virtual visits with patients using the province's Zoom for Healthcare platform³³. Newfoundland and Labrador have a telepathology platform that allows pathology samples to be examined more quickly by making them digitally accessible³⁴. The province of Saskatchewan has a comprehensive platform that includes online, and tele-healthcare accessed through HealthLine811 and HealthLine Online³⁵.

Manitoba has a virtual hospice service through the Canadian Virtual Hospice. This provides information about palliative services and online access to palliative care specialists. On this virtual platform users can ask experts questions, retrieve articles about managing symptoms, or learn about how to navigate the healthcare system³⁶. The Canadian Virtual Hospice also provides professionals with tools to communicate better with their patients and their families. Seniors in Manitoba can also receive care using various TeleCARE services³⁷. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are carrying out virtual appointments, e-consulting and electronic referral services^{38, 39}. In 2019, Newfoundland and Labrador announced plans to build on the success of their digital health record system by continuing to expand the province's TeleHealth and Remote Patient Monitoring services so people could access their health care providers without having to leave their community⁴¹.

Yukon is using a platform called Virtual Elder Care and remote monitoring which provides instant connection for its healthcare practitioners⁴². Through its 1Health platform, Yukon is attempting to provide on-the-land experiences through virtual reality to improve the quality of life for Elders⁴³. Other provinces are also using telemedicine for mental health. The Northwest Territories have an e-mental health platform which uses the internet and technologies like cellular phone apps to provide individuals with care when they need it⁴⁴.

Remote monitoring and health devices

Remote monitoring technology is increasingly being used for health monitoring at home to help older

adults stay as long as possible in their communities⁴⁵. Provinces and Territories around Canada are employing different modes of remote monitoring and other technological health devices, resulting in improved healthcare and safety for older adults.

Through a citizen-led initiative, British Columbia has a Silver Alert system which helps to find older adults who may go missing due to Alzheimer's or dementia⁴⁶. New Brunswick announced in their new health plan the intention to expand use of technologies to support health care, such as wearables and home-based monitoring technologies to support aging in place⁴⁷. The province also uses Carelink, which provides remote monitoring through sensors and cameras installed in an older adult's house in unobtrusive places⁴⁸. This allows older adults' caregivers, family members and healthcare provider(s) to monitor for behaviour patterns which raise alarm when changes are observed. Differences in the patterns lead to early detection of conditions thereby allowing for early intervention. Québec has the Telehealth Network, developed in 2019. It encompasses remote monitoring and virtual care. There are 4 Telehealth coordination centers (TCCs), one in each integrated university health and social services network (RUISSS) territory⁴⁹. Prince Edward Island has home monitoring for COPD and cardiac issues specifically, which is monitored by a nurse⁵⁰.

Alberta is using technological devices to monitor health related issues such as falls and medication compliance⁵¹. Smart sensors monitor falls and safety issues while smart pill dispensers help with the taking of medication by setting reminders thereby improving adherence to treatments⁵². Nova Scotia is using the Northwood Intouch Personal emergency response and wireless sensor technology to help maintain independence at home⁵³. This includes help buttons, automatic fall detectors, pill dispensers, stove sensors, wandering alarms, bed alarms, flood detectors, and more⁵⁴.

Responses during Covid19

In order to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic there was need for many health care services to harness technology. This was necessitated by the need to minimize contact and gatherings as much as possible. People can now consult their general practitioners via the internet, getting prescriptions renewal, and thereafter getting medications delivered directly to the household without any physical contact^{55, 56}.

Furthermore, there has been a need to provide information about exposure to COVID-19 or to contact trace, so provinces including Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and Saskatchewan adopted the COVID Alert App⁵⁷. The government of Canada also developed and employed the ArriveCAN app which is a central method for ordering COVID-19 tests and receiving results for travelers⁵⁸.

Post-COVID-19, there was a marked increase in the use of virtual healthcare. Findings have shown that this growth was enabled by a greater willingness to use virtual platforms by patients, physicians and providers compared to the period before the pandemic^{59, 60}. However, inequities related to affordability and access to the internet, or devices, is still an issue for many^{61, 62}. Access to the internet is something older adults may grapple with in some parts of the country due to the cost and the remoteness of the places where they live⁶³. While virtual care has given governments a glimpse into the possibilities, access issues remain a challenge to be addressed.

Conclusion

Most Provinces and Territories are using digital health technologies and innovative tools to manage the health of older adults. This is driven by the aim of helping seniors to stay independent longer and continue to live in their own communities. In general, provinces are deploying these services through regional health authorities, crown corporations, departments or units with a virtual health mandate, as well as working with industry or other technology actors. Overall, there is a clear trajectory in the policy landscape nationwide toward increasing support for health technologies to support citizens, health care personnel, and health system performance.

Appendix 1

The table below provides a snapshot showing what current innovative technologies provinces have with a key to explain the nuanced differences that exist.

Province	Governance Structures	Digital Health Records	Telemedicine/ Virtual Visits	Remote Monitoring
	Provincial: division within the department of health dedicated to virtual health care/digital strategies	Provinces using a variety of electronic management of health records	Provinces using different forms of telemedicine or healthcare including e-consultations and virtual care †	Provinces employing technological devices to assist older adults age in their communities
British Columbia	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alberta	—	✓	✓	✓
Saskatchewan	—	✓	✓	✓
Manitoba		✓*	✓	✓
Ontario	✓	✓	✓	✓
Québec		✓	✓	✓
New Brunswick	—	✓	✓	✓
Prince Edward Island		✓	✓	✓
Newfoundland and Labrador		✓*	✓	✓
Nunavut			✓	
Yukon		✓*	✓	✓
NWT		✓	✓	

† All provinces, with the exception of Alberta whose codes are now permanent, have temporary billing codes in place for physicians to conduct virtual visits, having been put in place as a result of the pandemic.

— There is no division in department of health, but there is a crown corporation in place that has aspects of digital health within it.

* It is unclear if patients can access the DHR, or if it is for professionals only.

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