The Chopping Block: B.C.'s eHealth joins sick list

B.C. audit report another reason to stop funding Health Infoway

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Two days ago *FP Comment*'s budget-cutting series, *The Chopping Block*, identified Canada Health Infoway as a possible target. The independent agency, run by Ottawa and the provinces to set up a national electronic health record for every Canadian, appears to be fast taking on the attributes of a spending boondoggle.

About $1.6-billion in federal money has already been allocated by Infoway, and billions more will be spent by Ottawa and the provinces over the coming years. One early estimate put the total cost at more than $10-billion. That estimate is now outdated, and there is little on the public record to indicate Canadians will get much value for the money.

The Chopping Block review of Canada Health Infoway appeared here on Thursday, too late to incorporate a new blistering report from B.C. Auditor General John Doyle on British Columbia's share of the Infoway effort. Even by the usual circumspect language standards of auditors general, Mr. Doyle's report is a scathing review of the B.C. government's budgeting methods, planning, spending controls, lack of coordination — the usual government stuff, only worse. As a result, Mr. Doyle has put the province's EHR project on probation, saying he will be following up with the Ministry of Health Services "every six months until the EHR is implemented," something that's now not expected before 2013, or five years behind original plan.

The B.C. experience mirrors the eHealth fiasco in Ontario, where the Infoway push for a national EHR system produced a $1-billion spending fiasco and a report last October from the Ontario Auditor General detailing contract-issuing scandals, cost overruns and investment in unused or even unusable technology.

Four other province's are auditing their programs. Federal Auditor General Sheila Fraser completed work on Infoway last November. Sometime in April, Ms. Fraser will issue a joint overview report on all of the audits. How Ms. Fraser finesses this growing exercise on megaprojectism will likely set the future of Canada Health Infoway. What we know so far, however, makes it clear that Ottawa should continue to hold off on any future allocations of cash to Infoway pending Ms. Fraser's final audit overview. At last report, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's department has effectively frozen a planned $500-million increase in Infoway's funding pending completion of "due diligence."

The worry point for taxpayers and users of our health care system is that all these auditors general will have exposed and chopped down a lot of dead trees within the federal-provincial Infoway forest without taking a meaningful look at the forest.

The report from the B.C. auditor general, unlike the Ontario and federal AG reports, takes the EHR review a little deeper into the "challenges and risks" taxpayers face. While B.C. is now on track to spending $222-million on its electronic system, "it remains unclear how electronic health records will be deployed to users and what benefits will ultimately be realized." What this means, essentially, is the $222-million will be spent ($110-million paid by Infoway) without knowing what the benefits will be. "Early efforts by the ministry to develop a plan to measure the health impacts and outcomes of the investment in the EHR were not successful."

In fact, the project had no idea of what it was trying to accomplish, and no benchmarks to tell it whether it would accomplish anything. "Baseline information for later comparisons has not been established." As a result of the audit, the project will now spend $3.5-million to develop an evaluation model so it can know whether it will have achieved anything. It won't be available until late 2010. Determination of success, in other words, will be developed after the project is mostly complete. Any bets that the model will set standards that are outside the limits of the system that's already been built? This is like building a hockey arena without knowing how many seats to install, and then doing a count on completion of the arena and declaring that the number of seats in place is exactly on target.

The B.C. audit also shows that the province plunged into the electronic swamp without knowing what the costs were going to be, beyond a

“notional” estimate of $150-million. The audit said the department’s reports were “missing an estimate of the full cost to completion.” The current estimate is $222-million by April, 2013. Then there’s the operating costs, estimated at $27.4-million to the government, but not including the added costs that might have to be borne by doctors, hospitals, pharmacists and others. What will all this spending, set to rise to billions across Canada, deliver in benefits?

EHR is one of those great blue-sky ideas that seem sound and logical. If the health records of every health system user could be centralized, the health history of every Canadian — doctor’s visits, diagnostic history, prescription records, hospital treatments, surgeries, ear aches, MRI reports, X-Rays, and everything else — would be available in one file. Each patient could see that file, and so would each doctor and hospital.

Such a system would allegedly deliver massive benefits in health care delivery, error avoidance, and operational savings. But would it? Aside from a few studies from consultants conducted years ago, there are few solid analyses of eHealth’s deliverable values. Billions will be spent but nobody really knows if the promised benefits are reasonable. Unfortunately, the auditors general are not charged with making or equipped with the skills to reach what are essentially economic and market decisions.

The information tracking and storage effort behind eHealth projects is massive. Are there really practical and measurable benefits to patients or the entire system if every broken toe, appendix removal and Valium prescription is centralized in one file and transportable across the country? Disclosure issues are already the cause of great concern among people who value privacy. But the main issue is the attempt to create a massive centralized planned system at great cost without having any advance or measurable idea of what the benefits will be. That should be the focus of the auditors now, especially given what we know about how the money is being spent in Ontario and British Columbia.

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