



Increasing Access to Specialized Care: The Ontario eConsult Program

The Ottawa Hospital

Our Challenge

Timely, equitable access to specialist advice remains a major concern for hospitals and health care providers across the province. Ontarians often wait too long to access specialized care; the average wait time to see a specialist in Ontario is 53 days and growing. Hospitals are grappling with the need to reduce patient backlogs in accessing specialized care, though with some treatment guidance, many patients could be cared for solely by their primary care provider (PCP), where they are often more comfortable and confident in the advice they receive. Patients who live in rural or remote areas must often travel for hours just to attend an appointment, while patients who are frail, mobility impaired, or face other challenging circumstances may find attending an in-person specialist appointment overwhelming.

The Ontario eConsult Program enables PCPs to consult with specialists and ask clinical questions about a patient's care through a secure online application. Providers receive a response in less than a week, which often eliminates the need for a patient referral to an in-person appointment. eConsult reduces patient wait times, decreases patient backlogs, and can be a key tool in improving overall operational efficiencies in hospitals across the province.

Our Process

The Ontario eConsult Program (eConsult Program) was created to enable timely and equitable access to specialist advice for all patients in Ontario. The program, with the support of the Ministry of Health (Ministry), integrates two successful initiatives: the Champlain BASE™ eConsult service and Ontario Telemedicine Network's (OTN) Direct to Specialist

eConsult service. Ever evolving, the program is currently working in partnership with Ontario MD (OMD) and eHealth Ontario (now Ontario Health) to integrate the eConsult program into Electronic Medical Records (EMRs), an enhancement which further enables care coordination and brings added efficiencies for health care providers and hospitals in Ontario.

Our Solution

The eConsult program enables physicians and nurse practitioners to ask specialists clinical questions electronically and receive a response within days, often eliminating the need for an in-person patient visit. Accessed primarily through the secure OTNhub (otnhub.ca), the program is led by the Ontario eConsult Centre of Excellence (COE), housed at The Ottawa Hospital in partnership with the Bruyère Research Institute. Delivery partners are OTN, OMD, and eHealth Ontario, with the support of the Ministry.

The eConsult program includes four services which health care providers and organizations can access: the Ontario eConsult service, the Champlain BASE™ regional service, Teledermatology, and Teleophthamology. The Ontario eConsult Service, a multispecialty service available province-wide, offers users the choice of two models of care:

1. the BASE™ Managed Specialty model, in which PCPs submit cases to a regional- or provincial-managed service, where cases are assigned to specialists in the selected specialty group based on availability, and
2. the OTN Direct to Specialist model, in which PCPs submit cases directly to individual specialists.

Since its inception, the eConsult Program has created efficiencies within Ontario's health care system through a reduction of wait times for specialized care (median response time of 1.2 days), avoidance of unnecessary referrals (71% of cases resolved without needing a face-to-face specialist visit), cost savings (\$47.35/case, compared with \$133.60/case for traditional referrals), and higher levels of patient and provider satisfaction. In 2018-2019, participating PCPs sent 45,538 eConsults on behalf of Ontario patients, an increase of 11,595 eConsults from the previous fiscal year.

Our Success Factors

Project Leadership

Dr. Clare Liddy (Primary Care Lead) and Dr. Erin Keely (Specialist Lead), co-creators of the Champlain BASE™ eConsult service, serve as co-executive directors of the eConsult COE. The COE provides clinical leadership, program oversight, and quality assurance for the eConsult Program, and oversees program operations including specialist remuneration and management of the BASE™ Managed Service model. Mr. Payam Pakravan, Vice President, Strategy & Analytics, and Dr. Rob Williams, Chief Medical Officer, provide leadership from OTN. Their experience in leading digital solutions, relationships with key stakeholders, and commitment to provider engagement and optimizing experience have been critical to the success of the program.

Involving Stakeholders

The eConsult program was formed in partnership with several key organizations. The program leverages OTN's Direct to Specialist service and technology platform, the OTNhub. OMD supported the rollout of the provincial eConsult Program by managing its integration into EMRs, providing change management support in collaboration with regional partner sites, and contributing to program oversight through governance. eHealth Ontario supports EMR integration with provincial Health Information Access Layer assets and provides ongoing support for the provision of ONE ID accounts for eConsult program users. The Ministry provides strategic direction and makes policy decisions for implementation.

In addition to the provincial partners described above, a number of regional partner sites coordinate and administer the program within their region. Existing partner sites include Champlain BASE™, the South East Academic Medical Organization, Hamilton Health Sciences (HITS team), eHealth Centre of Excellence (Waterloo Wellington), Women's College Hospital (Toronto Central), Connecting South West Ontario, TransForm Shared Services Organization (Erie St. Clair), and St. Joseph's Care Group (North West). Collaborating with stakeholders enables the strength of each organization to be leveraged, exemplifying a key factor in the successful implementation of the eConsult program.

Involving End Users and Creating a Feedback Dialogue

Any successful digital health initiative must meet the goals of the providers using it. Through the provincial Clinical Advisory Group for eConsult, PCPs and specialists have provided input to the eConsult Program throughout the planning, design and dissemination process. Additionally, PCPs complete a mandatory closeout survey at the end of each eConsult in which they identify whether the response provided them with new information, the impact on their decision to refer, and their satisfaction with the service. An optional free-text field allows them to elaborate or provide any additional feedback they consider relevant. The closing survey helps the eConsult program team improve the service by offering a prompt overview of PCP satisfaction, flagging any issues as they arise. Additionally, comments regarding individual specialists are passed on to those individuals, allowing them to receive feedback as well.

Workflow Redesign (listening to PCPs, using delegates, EMR integration)

While the eConsult program has the potential to improve access to specialist advice and reduce wait times, its implementation can potentially create additional work for PCPs, who must learn the system and find a way to incorporate it into their workflow. Our team has explored strategies to minimize the eConsult

program's impact on PCP workflows and improve the experience of adoption. One strategy is the use of office staff as delegates, allowing PCPs to conduct eConsults using the same model as traditional referrals, which are then adapted into eConsults by a central administrator who gains proficiency with the service. Implementation of the delegate model has been shown to increase the eConsult program's uptake and use.¹ In addition, OMD is exploring the integration of the eConsult program into EMRs in order to simplify adoption for PCPs.²

Patient-Centred, Population-Based Approach

A key factor for the success of the eConsult Program has been the application of a patient-centred, population-based approach that also meets the needs of health care providers and organizations. To facilitate implementation, the COE connected with regional partner sites across Ontario to create local models operating in conjunction with an overarching provincial “umbrella service.” By allowing regional partners to administer the eConsult program in partnership with the eConsult COE, the eConsult program can tailor its delivery to the needs of individual populations and health care organizations, ensuring that priority areas receive sufficient attention, and that the development of local communities of practice is supported. Regional services are supplemented with access to a roster of provincial services, allowing local providers to connect with providers from different specialties in cases where local specialists are unavailable. The provincial providers act as a safety net for patients in regions where fewer specialists practice, thereby ensuring equity of access.

Our Impact

The eConsult program has demonstrated a significant impact on key areas of care quality including population health, the timeliness of service and the impact on provider course of action. A total of 54,498 eConsults were completed between December 2018 and November

2019, with the top three specialty services accessed being Dermatology (13%), Hematology (10%), and Endocrinology and Metabolism (7%). There are currently 93 provincial BASE™ managed specialty groups, 2,542 active PCPs, and 748 active specialists on the Ontario eConsult Program. A 47% increase was seen in active PCPs using the eConsult program in the past year, resulting in greater access to health care for Ontarians, and increased efficiencies across Ontario's hospitals and health care organizations. The median response time for an eConsult was 1.2 days* and average time spent completing eConsults was reported to be 15 minutes.* Moreover, 99.8% of cases were sent with a response time of less than 30 days.* Requesting provider survey results demonstrated that the eConsult program resulted in a new or additional course of action 55% of the time, and confirmed an existing course of action 41% of the time.† Unnecessary referrals were avoided 52% of the time.†

*Based on a subset of 28,020 eConsults

†Based on a subset of 25,029 eConsults

Our Learnings

Through the process of implementing the eConsult program, our team has learned a number of key lessons:

- **Collaborate with like-minded experts:** Connect with individuals and organizations that share your goals and can provide invaluable resources and insight.
- **Focus on the problem you are trying to solve:** Avoid “scope creep,” in which your team pursues tangentially related objectives at the expense of your original goal. Flexibility is important in terms of approach but stay focused on the original problem.
- **Base your conclusions on meaningful metrics:** Find a way to measure the desired outcome and focus your efforts there. When implementing a technology solution, the goal is to improve care for the population being served, rather than the success of the technology itself.
- **Establish clinical networks:** As the end users of eConsult, clinicians are essential to the success of the innovation. Find passionate clinicians to serve as local champions and seek feedback whenever possible.

1 Thind, A., M. Stewart, D. Manuel, T. Freeman, A. Terry, V. Chevendra et al. (2012). What Are Wait Times to See a Specialist? An Analysis of 26,942 Referrals in Southwestern Ontario. *Healthcare Policy* 8(1), 80-91.

2 Liddy C, de Man G, Moroz I, Afkham A, Mercer J, Keely E. The successful integration of an eConsult service into a Family Health Team's workflow. *Telemedicine and e-Health* 2019 [epub ahead of print]



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“This service enhances care so much. I am now more certain about a plan of action. And the consultant added another course of action to prevent stroke that I had never considered! My overall care of this patient has been improved immensely...as well, I now feel more confident with other diabetic patients who are not yet ‘at target’”

– Primary Care Provider

“I really believe in this type of technology as a means of physician education. There are many times a patient does not need to see a specialist, the PCP just needs a bit of guidance on management. This is perfect for that.”

– Specialist

“It [eConsult] just kind of gives me a bit of peace of mind knowing that there’s more than one person involved in making the decision.”

– Patient

