

Electronic Medical Records

Elliot Lake Family Health Team — patient care innovators

by OntarioMD Communications

ELLIOT LAKE, LOCATED NORTH OF THE TRANS-CANADA HIGHWAY BETWEEN SUDBURY AND SAULT STE. MARIE, IS BRINGING A PIONEERING SPIRIT TO PATIENT CARE. THE ELLIOT LAKE FAMILY HEALTH TEAM (ELFHT) USES AN ELECTRONIC MEDICAL RECORD (EMR) FUNDED BY EHEALTH ONTARIO AND THE ONTARIO TELEMEDICINE NETWORK TO HELP OFFER TIMELY AND BETTER CO-ORDINATED PATIENT CARE.

ELFHT began using an EMR when it opened in mid-2007, following the amalgamation of three family practices. Dr. James Chau, a family physician with a geriatric focus, sums up his experience: “The EMR keeps me much more on top of what’s happening with each patient. It has helped me be a more effective and efficient physician.”

He explains the greatest benefit he has seen: “The EMR has a big impact on preventive care. It provides the ability to track when people had their last mammogram, Pap or other screening test. We have a much more complete chart with no gaps.”

Dr. Christine Pun, IT Lead for the ELFHT, sums up the benefits she has experienced: “The biggest advantage is the instant access to everything about the patient. I don’t have to go around looking for information, it’s all in one place.”

Victoria Luckham, the ELFHT pharmacist, consults with patients for medication reviews, counsels on smoking cessation, discusses safe and appropriate use of natural health products as well as answering drug information questions from patients, allied health

professionals and physicians. She says: “I don’t have to run around looking for paper charts. All documentation is in the EMR, which is very helpful. Because I see the health history as a snapshot, for instance cholesterol levels over the last year, I can show patients the correlation between medication use and their test results.”

Patient safety also improves with EMR use. Ms. Luckham notes that when new guidelines on ACE inhibitors and ARBs came out in 2009, she used the EMR to find all ELFHT patients taking both medications, and notified their

physician for potential follow up. In the paper world, she does not believe she would have been able to do this.

More effective patient encounters and follow up

Electronic charting with an EMR has helped ELFHT staff access information for effective encounters, and has facilitated patient follow up — with some interesting and unexpected results.

Dr. Chau describes how EMR alerts help him improve preventive care: “Right at the top of the patient chart, the EMR shows the tests that are due. We

Elliot Lake and its Family Health Team

Elliot Lake is a mining town that reinvented itself in 1987 as a retirement destination, and is now the Canadian community with the highest percentage of seniors. The main family health practice is the Elliot Lake Family Health Team (www.elfht.com), which includes 13 physicians, three registered nurses, a nurse practitioner, a pharmacist, a dietitian, a social worker, as well as a part-time respiratory therapist and chiropractor. A total of 10,000 residents are rostered with the FHT, out of a population of 13,500.

Pierrette Brown, ELFHT Executive Director, is enthusiastic about their innovations combined with the FHT approach: “This is the best thing that has happened to health care since I became a nurse in 1974. Now, we share the load so that people don’t fall through the cracks.”

Ontario Telemedicine Network at ELFHT

Ontario Telemedicine Network is another key service at the Elliot Lake Family Health Team. Patients come to ELFHT and use the telemedicine studios for medical appointments with specialists or other health-care professionals anywhere across Ontario via videoconferencing. It is used for 70 to 80 sessions per month, allowing patients, who may be quite ill, to avoid a minimum two-hour trip to a regional centre, and a much longer trip if the consulting physician is further away. This is especially valuable in winter, when snow, ice and wind can make roads dangerous.

see that very clearly at the start of the encounter and can initiate the discussion right off the top to ensure all the preventive measures are looked after properly.”

Another benefit Dr. Chau appreciates is the ability to see whether tests have been carried out: “The EMR shows when tests are ordered and when someone does not complete their blood work, imaging or something else, we will see that those results are missing. When they come back, we can ask why it wasn’t done or what happened. That’s made a big difference.”

All test results are stored in the patient’s electronic record. Most of the tests are done by the local community laboratory, and the results are automatically sent directly to the EMR. Other tests are scanned into the EMR once received in paper format.

An unexpected but welcome benefit is improved follow up through telephone communications. Dr. Chau explains: “With paper, when a patient called, we’d get a paper stuck in the chart sent to us. It may or may not have fallen out and might not be in the right order when we received the chart. Now, everything’s in the EMR and if we end up sending back a message, everything’s documented. I have always received a lot of calls from patients, and with the EMR, patients are actually calling more. They know if they leave me a message, it will get to me. It has improved communications and I think patients appreciate that they’re getting more feedback when they call in.”

Ontario Telemedicine Network and EMR

Dr. Pun appreciates the Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN) videocon-

ferencing service, enabled by eHealth Ontario’s network, that lets her patients access specialist care without leaving their community: “I get the encounter summary note in the EMR the day of the visit and can act on it quickly,” says Dr. Pun.

Jessica Wright, RN, the ELFHT OTN co-ordinator, attends each patient OTN session and enters the summary into the patient’s EMR.

Ms. Wright explains how patients appreciate the service: “They all love the fact that they have better access to specialists and don’t have to drive to see them. They find it amazing and say ‘who would have thought I’d be seeing a doctor over the TV!’”

One of the reasons she chose to work at ELFHT was precisely its innovative approach: “As a recent grad, I knew all the things I studied in school were happening here, and I wanted the opportunity to put them into practice,” says Ms. Wright.

What’s Next

The Elliot Lake Family Health Team continues to explore ways to expand EMR use to improve its ability to deliver quality patient care and practice efficiently.

Dr. Pun notes that they are looking at having an encounter form open automatically as soon as a patient signs in at reception so the chart is open and available for the physician before the encounter starts. They are also looking at standardizing forms and templates for all physicians to make it easier to cover each other’s patients.

Another enhancement being explored is the use of voice recognition software so physicians reduce the amount of keyboarding required.

Summing up his EMR experience, Dr. Chau says: “I couldn’t live without an EMR. When you make the switch-over, it can take some effort to adapt at first, but it’s well worth the effort in the long run in terms of how much it helps you improve patient care and your own practice.” ■

The EMR Adoption column is provided by OntarioMD, a subsidiary of the OMA, that manages Ontario’s EMR Adoption Program, funded by eHealth Ontario. For more information on EMR Adoption, visit www.ontariomd.ca, e-mail emrfunding@ontariomd.com, or call toll-free 1.866.744.8668. If you would like a physician Peer Leader to answer your questions, a free service for physicians, e-mail peer.leader.program@ontariomd.com. The deadline for applying is September 30, 2011.

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