

# CANADIAN Healthcare Technology

## Grand River Hospital portal gives patients active role in care plans

BY **JERRY ZEIDENBERG**

KITCHENER, ONT. – Grand River Hospital has launched North America's first comprehensive patient portal – a web-based service that enables patients to access their personalized treatment plans, manage their appointments, self-monitor their side effects and symptoms and re-order prescriptions all through a secure Internet connection.

For several years, healthcare gurus and analysts have predicted the emergence of 'empowered patients' who could participate in the management of their records and treatments in this way. But it appears that Grand River Hospital is actually the first to do it.

"The portal gives patients an active role in managing their care, and makes them a part of their care team," said Glen Kearns, vice president and CIO at the Grand River Hospital. "They're not just having things done to them, they're taking steps for themselves."

Kearns explained that by more closely monitoring their symptoms, test results, medications and appointments, patients can improve the effectiveness of their therapies and cut down on re-admissions to hospital. That not only improves quality of care and patient satisfaction, but it

should also result in cost reductions for the 495-bed community hospital.

In March, the hospital rolled out its Care Connections patient portal, which its I.T. team developed over a six-month period in conjunction with McKesson Information Solutions, the Atlanta-based com-



**Project leaders Claudette DeLenardo and Glen Kearns.**

pany that supplies its hospital information system and physician portal.

The new patient portal appears to be so promising for reducing hospital costs and improving outcomes that McKesson is in the process of commercializing the solution and will be offering it to hospitals across North America. The company demonstrated Care Connections in its pavilion at the

HIMSS conference and trade show, held in Orlando, Fla., in February, and attracted a large flock of visitors who were eager to have a look at the system.

Kearns explained that Grand River will use a phased-in approach for the Care Connections patient portal, starting with cancer patients, then expanding to include renal dialysis, diabetes, surgical specialties, complex continuing care and other areas.

In the initial stages, the service will offer patients the opportunity to schedule certain types of appointments, pose questions to their care-givers, and obtain detailed information about cancer care procedures, along with the reactions they can expect to cancer treatment and the myriad medications that accompany the treatment.

If they're experiencing unusual symptoms, they're urged to contact their care givers for feedback and assistance.

Kearns said Care Connections will be upgraded to allow patients to renew prescriptions through the hospital pharmacy, and they'll even be able to transfer pick-up of their medications from outside pharmacies to the hospital facility.

In the next phase, the portal upgrade will also allow them to view test results from the lab and diagnostic imaging departments – enabling them to keep bet-

ter tabs on their condition, and to work with caregivers on fine-tuning their medications and therapies.

The hospital expects this will result in better outcomes for patients, and fewer admissions to hospital for adverse drug events and other complications.

Kearns observed that many hospitals have patient web sites, but it's difficult to find one that's connected to clinical systems. "We haven't come across anyone who has provided access to clinical information and care plans," he commented.

Claudette DeLenardo, program director for the patient portal, stressed that patients have access to detailed treatment plans to help them with managing their conditions. For example, cancer care is broken down into care cycles, with procedures, medications, and expected side effects outlined for each week of treatment.

"We've developed hyperlinks, embedded in the system, to let patients know what to do if you have, say, nausea or vomiting," said DeLenardo. She said the treatment plans advise patients of how and when to take their drugs, what the medications are expected to do, and even how to pronounce the names of the pharmaceuticals they're dealing with.

There's a great deal of advice on the portal, describing what to do for each week of each cycle. "We let patients know, for example, that on day eight of their first cycle, their white blood cell counts may begin to drop and that the patient needs to monitor themselves carefully," said DeLenardo. "The portal tells you at what point you should seek help if you are experiencing certain side effects."

Moreover, patients can chart their own symptoms on a 1-4 scale, so they can review their status with their healthcare team. For cancer, there are approximately 30 symptoms they can monitor and discuss with their care teams.

Kearns said the system took only six months to build for a number of reasons: the project had the approval and support of the hospital's top management, including president and CEO Dennis Egan. It also had sufficient resources, with a combination of hospital staff and experts from McKesson working to develop the service. Finally, it builds on existing systems, namely the existing hospital information system and the physician portal.

And while patients will be able to review important clinical information, such as lab results, their physicians must

first approve the transfer of such results into the patient portal.

CEO Dennis Egan got the ball rolling on the project about a year-and-a-half ago, after attending seminars with a former MIT instructor who teaches executives about the productivity gains that can be made through harnessing the Internet and existing databases.

After some preliminary work, Egan persuaded his board to allocate resources to the patient portal project, citing the many benefits for the hospital: "There is major potential," said Egan. He observed that the portal should relieve a great deal of pressure on specialists for information, test results and prescription advice and renewals from patients. It will also provide patients with a source of validated information about cancer and other conditions, eliminating a plethora of false or low-grade information they collect from countless web sources. And the self-charting feature will improve communications between patients and physicians. "Now, the patient will be able to tell us more easily what has been going on," said Egan. "We believe we've really hit on something here," he added. "There's a lot of excitement about it."

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