

## A wake-up call on chronic illness

**The Toronto Star**

May 22, 2008 04:30 AM

Many large retailers have computer systems that can tell you every purchase you have made in their stores. Some even have systems that will let you know when an appliance you bought is due for a regular maintenance checkup.

While hard to fathom, that means the health of your refrigerator might well be better managed than a chronic disease that could take your life. In the absence of system-wide computerized medical records, the Ontario Health Quality Council estimates that nearly 8,000 Ontarians a year die needlessly, in part because doctors don't have the right tools to properly manage patients with chronic diseases.

Chronic disease management is the focal point of the council's 2008 report. One in three Ontarians suffers from a chronic disease, with the figure rising to 80 per cent for those over 65. Together, these diseases, which include diabetes, heart disease, asthma and arthritis, account for 89 per cent of all deaths in Canada.

As there are no cures for them, chronic diseases require continuous monitoring and regular treatment. And it is here that electronic medical records can potentially make a big difference – as the report notes, they "can help practitioners monitor their patients more closely, create reminders of when a test is due or which drug should be ordered."

But without such a system, the council found that only 5.5 per cent of diabetes patients were getting the full range of care available to manage the disease. For coronary disease, just one in three receives all the recommended treatment; most were not even getting the full regime of drugs recommended to prevent clogging of their blood vessels.

Chronic disease management is only one area where the electronic health records and modern information systems the government has promised could significantly improve the quality of health care. In an era where vast quantities of data can be instantly transmitted around the globe, it is alarming that hospitals cannot access test results, diagnostic images or patient records from doctors' offices at the same electronic speed.

As the council says, "The whole issue of investing in information technology and management ... remains our biggest concern with Ontario's health system ... We can't expect to keep improving health care without a revolution in our use of information technology."

This is not a new critique. The council expressed the same concerns in both of its previous reports, but to no avail as spending on information technology is not increasing.

It's time the government finally started listening.