



## Records snag causes health risk

**Condition of chronic disease patients in jeopardy by lack of electronic information system: Report**

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An estimated 8,000 Ontarians die needlessly from chronic diseases every year in part because of the government's slow progress in setting up a system of electronic health records.

That's a key conclusion in the annual report of the Ontario Health

Quality Council, a provincial agency that found fewer than half of diabetics, for example, get enough testing and monitoring to keep their blood sugar under control.

That kind of statistic is "staggering," said council chair Ray Hession.

About one-third of Ontarians have chronic conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma, emphysema and arthritis – with that rate rising to 80 per cent for people over 65.

### GAPS IN CARE

*Based on surveys of patient records at medical clinics, the Ontario Health Quality Council estimates:*

Only 47 per cent of diabetics have their blood sugar under control. Only 1 in 3 people with coronary artery disease get all the recommended treatment, such as cholesterol-lowering medications, beta blockers and aspirin.

Women are "far less likely" than men to get the proper medications for coronary artery disease. For example, 43 per cent of women had doctors recommend cholesterol-lowering drugs, compared to 81 per cent of men.



TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Tracking diabetics through electronic health records - reminding them when they need tests or monitoring - would enhance health, an Ontario Health Quality Council report says.

"It is getting to the point where failure to adopt and use information systems is putting whole sections of the Ontario population at a disadvantage when it comes to health care," the report stated.

Tracking diabetics through electronic health records – reminding them when they need tests or monitoring – would improve the situation and lead to fewer health complications, the report said.

"The province needs to do a much better job of managing chronic disease," Hession told a news conference at Queen's Park. "This is our number one concern. Ontario is failing to meet the chronic disease challenge."

Electronic health records would mean health-care providers would have a patient's medical history "at their fingertips," said NDP health critic France Gélinas (Nickel Belt), the former director of a Sudbury community health clinic.

"If you're serious about turning health care around, chronic disease is the key."

The report's statistics are based on a 2006 survey of 4,108 patients at 137 medical practices, excluding Northern Ontario.

The annual report also found:

60 per cent of Ontarians can't get in to see their family doctor within two days of becoming sick.

400,000 Ontarians are looking for a family doctor, although 800,000 citizens do not have one.

Waits for MRI examinations are too long at an average 111 days despite a doubling in the number of scans performed. The government's target is 28 days.

Improvements in patient safety have been minimal, with the rates of life-threatening infections picked up in hospitals "barely changed" in five years.

About 1 in 10 nursing home residents still have falls resulting in trips to emergency rooms.

However, in general, the health system is working "pretty well," Hession said.

While the Liberal government promised in last fall's election campaign to have a system of electronic health records by 2015, Hession said he has yet to see a plan with timelines to make it happen.

Despite the council's urgings on this front in previous years, a plan is still not complete and no date has been set for its release.

"We're working on it," said Laurel Ostfield, spokesperson for Health Minister George Smitherman, who was unavailable for comment.

In the meantime, Ontario is starting a registry for diabetes patients this year, as part of an effort to keep more chronic disease patients in good health and out of emergency rooms, she said.

The electronic health records delay is unacceptable given that the government has been in power for almost five years, said Progressive Conservative health critic Elizabeth Witmer.

Smart Systems for Health, the government agency building an electronic health records system, has spent more than \$650 million so far with "very little to show for it," Witmer said.

An investigation by the *Toronto Star* in 2005 first revealed the delays at the agency and a consultant found last year that the agency was poorly regarded in the health-care community, lacked strategic direction and had not been held properly accountable by the government.