

# **ACTION for Health Project Proposal: Executive Summary (2003)**

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Many claims have been made about the benefits of networked computing, which is often touted as a way to increase efficiency through improvements to service delivery, record keeping, and data collection and analysis. The health sector has been increasingly subject to computerization: computers are the focal point of increased data collection activities (the production of health information), the internet is increasingly being seen as a means of disseminating health information to patients and their families (the consumption of health information), and advanced data analysis is increasingly supporting policy, treatment and financial decision making (the use of health information by health sector staff).

Although government spending aimed at computerization of the health sector has been high (along with expectations about the benefits that on-line health information and computerization will yield), little has been invested in determining whether or not existing programs are meeting stated goals. The research program outlined here will determine whether or not existing programs aimed at internet delivery of health information to health consumers and computerization of health sector jobs undertaken in efforts to improve both sector efficiencies and health outcomes are achieving stated goals, and preserving what Canadians value in our health system. **Our goal is to achieve a fuller understanding of the complex ways health information is produced, consumed and used by lay people, and produced and used by health sector professionals, in order to inform the design of policies and systems.** We will identify socio-technical issues, challenges and constraints to the realization of Canada's vision of the New Economy in the area of health information, through case studies employing qualitative and quantitative methods, to achieve an understanding of health information technology (HIT) which can be used to inform policy about its use, and development of new systems.

Our research focuses on what Canadians stated they value in their health system, and is aimed at improving practices so that stated program and policy objectives can be met. Research results will be communicated to key decision makers and health policy stakeholders. The goals are to:

- a) explore whether or not the introduction of information technology into the health sector is meeting stated policy objectives, and protecting what Canadians value in their health system (equity, compassion, individual and collective responsibility, respect for others, effectiveness and efficiency);
- b) explore the use of the internet as a means of gaining access to health information, and specifically, to determine what roles information intermediaries (people and/or hardware and software who help information seekers find the information they need) fill when those around them seek health information via computers; and
- c) look at the challenges that arise (including the need for computer skills, organizational and work design changes) when new IT is introduced into health sector work places.

The introduction of new technology in the health sector will be explored in relation to what Canadians value about our health system, by academics representing communications, law, computer science, psychology, social work, sociology, science, technology and society and library and information sciences, in cooperation with diverse partners in library and community settings, non acute health care settings and hospitals. Research will focus on issues emerging when IT is used in health settings by the general public, health care workers and marginal groups (e.g., low income citizens). The role of technology in the production, consumption and use of health information will be explored through multi-method case studies in Canada, Austria, Australia, the UK and Netherlands, and results will be communicated to diverse audiences including health system administrators and policy makers, academics, and other stakeholder groups. Research will focus on the use of IT by lay people (health literacy, and the role of information intermediaries in health information provision), health care professionals (e.g., related to changing work practices that accompany new information technology, as well as the challenges related to the introduction of standard practices imposed by information technology), and ethical and legal issues (e.g., privacy of health information, the ethics of identifying potential health service recipients through health data sets).

The potential for innovation in this proposal lies in its socio-technical orientation, deriving from a social informatics perspective, which gives primacy to the social contexts in which human interaction with computers occurs, and which "examines the design, uses, and consequences of information and communication technologies in ways that take into account their interaction with institutional and organizational contexts" [1: 217]. The project is also innovative in bringing together team members with proven track records working across disciplinary divides, who are skilled at bringing academic insights to bear on real world problems in meaningful ways.

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