



Bridging the Distance Across Northeastern Ontario

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By: Sean Barrette

Vast expanses of wilderness, geographic isolation of small, separated communities, and adverse weather conditions are common and challenging in northeastern Ontario. Providing high-quality patient care in this region depends on a high degree of regional cooperation and collaboration amongst northern hospitals.

"The entire population that our northern hospitals serve amounts to that of a mid-sized city in southern Ontario, but across an area larger than some provinces," says Mark Hurst, President and CEO of North Bay and District Hospital. "Residents of northeastern Ontario demand and deserve the same level of service that people in other parts of the province enjoy - the challenge is how to attain the critical mass to do it."

In order to realize that goal, the Northeastern Ontario Regional Hospitals Committee (NORHC) was created in January 2005 to strengthen regional relationships amongst the District Hospitals of northeastern Ontario. NORHC is comprised of the Hôpital régional de Sudbury Regional Hospital (HRSRH), North Bay and District Hospital (NBDH), Sault Area Hospitals (SAH), and Timmins and District Hospital (TADH).

"Each of our hospitals face challenges that are unique to our respective communities and backgrounds, but we all share similar key challenges such as the recruitment and retention of health care professionals," remarks TADH President and CEO Esko Vainio.

SAH President and CEO Jerome Quenneville agrees, *"District hospitals have a key role to play in advocacy for the northeast, identifying policies to address service gaps, and maintaining effective communications between hospitals. We all recognize that we are stronger together."*

The CEO and Board representatives from each hospital are responsible for bringing forth the issues being addressed by the NORHC to their Boards, and in turn, supplying Board input from those discussions. This ensures the NORHC can continuously move forward on key issues and understand shared opportunities and challenges.

Such cooperation is not without precedent. The northeast has a history of successful collaboration, as evidenced in the examples of the NORrad network of northeastern Ontario Hospitals which uses the Picture Archiving and Communication System (PACs) and the Northeastern Ontario Network (NEON).

The HRSRH and TADH are the two key PACs hubs for over 30 NEO hospitals that form the network. The system stores primarily diagnostic images, including x-ray, ultrasound, CT, Nuclear Medicine, and MRI. PACs also helps harmonize patient ID's. Using the Enterprise Master Patient Index, physicians may call up images from any diagnostic test a patient has undergone anywhere in the NORrad network. This provides all hospital sites with a unified view of radiology histories regardless of where patients enter the securely integrated system.

Fully integrated with Voice Recognition Reporting, radiologists have access to the most modern voice recognition software to create and sign-off reports in a paperless environment. PACs has proven to be a useful tool, leading to increases in the number of exams possible and a substantial decrease in report turnaround time.

According to *Vickie Kaminski*, HRSRH President and CEO, *"It is now difficult to imagine the inefficiency of physicians having to mail film and reports to one another, or physically travel to other towns to do so."* Kaminski adds, *"We are sharing valuable health care resources and expertise, and ensuring even remote populations have access to timely, high-quality patient care."*

Since its inception in 1999, NEON has generated a tremendous amount of interest from hospitals and other agencies as a model for regionalization. From the beginning, NEON's vision was to invite northeastern Ontario hospitals to participate in a joint and shared Hospital Information System. The significance of this project was the voluntary sharing of hospital information and related technologies. To date, most regional initiatives of such magnitude were mandated by the provincial government.

"NEON is an exciting initiative for hospitals in the northeast," says *Hal Fjelstead*, CEO Kirkland and District Hospital. *"The system allows us to seamlessly share patient information on a real-time basis, no small feat when you consider the geographical barriers we face."*

The success of the program was echoed by the recognition it received as a finalist for a Canadian Information Productivity Award. There is increasing demand for the system - St. Joseph's General Hospital in Elliot Lake became the ninth and latest health care organization to join the Network in May 2005. St. Joseph's CEO *Mike Hukezalie* explains, *"Information is the backbone of a cost-effective health care system. We joined NEON because of its proven track record and benefits. It improves our system's ability to deliver vital health services."*

The NEON consortium includes the HRSRH, Chapleau Health Services, Englehart and District Hospital, Kirkland and District Hospital, Northeast Mental Health Centre, Smooth Rock Falls Hospital, Temiskaming Hospital, TADH, St. Joseph's General Hospital and Lady Dunn Hospital in Wawa.

It is said that necessity is the mother of all invention. History has shown that collaboration is necessary in order to thrive in challenging environments. Small, rural and northern hospitals have demonstrated their willingness to work together in order to put their patients' interests first and continue to provide the high-quality health care they deserve.

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