

Digital records and patient choices

By Alexa Thompson

This fall the Nova Scotia provincial government plans to roll out a digital health records system, known as Personal Health Records or PHR.

I've been privileged to be involved in the pilot project for the last couple of years. It has allowed me to book online appointments with my family doctor, to access my test results, to keep track of my medications, specialist appointments and a host of other details. I can watch my blood pressure and keep a sharp eye on my weight and body mass index.

This past April, however, I ran into a situation I could not have handled as well without digital access to my medical records. I was diagnosed with grade 2 uterine cancer and my gynecologist wanted me to have a hysterectomy as soon as possible to prevent spread of the disease.

From that initial diagnosis, things moved rapidly. I saw a gynecologist/oncologist surgeon within days, and he confirmed the diagnosis. Then I was booked for the operation at the end of April. The week before the scheduled date I attended a pre-op clinic and did the usual blood tests, heart monitor, chat with the anesthetist, and so on. The last call was a chest x-ray; then I was free to go.

Before I got home, my phone was ringing. The x-ray indicated an enlarged heart and I was quickly scheduled for an echocardiogram the following Tuesday. On the Monday, my worried family doctor called me in as she had just received the x-ray, to tell me I would probably be seeing a cardiologist before the operation, now only three days away. She also expressed surprise at the x-ray results given that I am a resistance weight trainer.

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On Tuesday I had the echocardiogram. Late Wednesday I received the digital results from my doctor. No time for a personal consultation as I was due in the operating room the next morning. I read them and realized the results were within a normal range. It suggested the x-ray had been an anomaly but I'm not a medical professional.

Thursday morning, well before 8 a.m., as I lay on a gurney, prepped for surgery, the anesthetist dropped by. He had the echocardiogram results but he also wished I'd had time to see a cardiologist before the operation. He's confident there won't be a problem but he wants me to be aware of the risks and decide for myself if I want to go ahead. On the one hand I have cancer. On the other, I might experience heart failure during surgery. That is one hell of a decision to be asked to make moments before being wheeled into the O.R.

But I had read that echocardiogram. I understood the results. I wasn't just tak-

ing the anesthetist's word for it; I knew the best choice was to go ahead and eradicate the cancer before it grew worse.

That confidence in a very tricky situation came about solely because my doctor and I were involved in the digital health records pilot and I had had an opportunity to read and understand my test results within the privacy of my own home. I realize many patients might not want to deal with test results or feel unsure about understanding results without a physician's assistance. I appreciate that.

I'm sure there are doctors too who worry about patients struggling to interpret results on their own.

The important thing is I was given a choice. I chose to read that report. I chose to trust my own opinion as well as that of the anesthetist. Others may have chosen differently.

I was lucky. I came through the surgery and have been assured the cancer is gone.

I did see that heart specialist. A letter with the appointment time and date awaited me when I got home from hospi-

tal. It came through regular snail mail. Do you know what are the odds, if you live in a large apartment complex like I do, of a letter being accidentally misplaced in the wrong mailbox?

The heart surgeon confirmed everything was fine. Just don't lift 100 lbs. weights, he cautioned. I'm 67. I don't think that's going to be a problem. ■

Alexa Thompson is a freelance writer and editor with an interest in patient-centred healthcare.



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