

CANADIANS TO USHER IN NEXT WAVE OF DIGITAL HEALTH USE



Nancy Huyck (R) and her daughter Cheryl Ford take a break from volunteering at the Back to the Garden Music Festival at Jones Farm in Dorchester, Ontario on August 20, 2017.

For **Nancy Huyck**, unplanned visits to the doctor, often to help manage the chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) she is living with, were monthly events.

I like to keep myself busy and I volunteer a lot, but sometimes I overdo it and before I realize it, it's too late and my daughter has to take me to the emergency or the walk-in clinic," says Huyck, a 71-year-old grandmother who lives in Dorchester, ON — a small town located 17 kilometres east of London, ON.

She is quick to point out, however, that she has been to neither the emergency department nor a walk-in clinic since May.

That's when Huyck enrolled in her local Community Paramedicine Remote Patient Monitoring Program. The South Central Community Development Corporation, the project's sponsor, is working with Middlesex-London Emergency Medical Services (MLEMS) and 10 other community paramedic services across Ontario to provide remote patient monitoring. The program provides digital health tools in the homes of patients so they can measure their vitals such as blood pressure, weight, and oxygen levels. The information is sent to paramedics who intervene proactively when they note a change in an individual's health status. The goal is to keep patients like Huyck as well as possible so she can remain in her home, and out of the hospital.

MLEMS paramedic Scott Rektor came to Huyck's home to teach her how to use the tools. Ever since, she measures and transmits her own blood pressure, weight, and oxygen levels every day. Readings that require follow-up are flagged, and a secure portal provides patients and their loved ones with their up-to-date results.

One day, Huyck received a call from Rektor when her blood pressure was higher than usual.

"I made an in-home visit to see Nancy, and decided to get in touch with her physician to discuss her results," says Rektor. "We were able to address it at home, and when I followed up with her later, she was feeling much better. I think this is a great example of digital health improving integration and com-

munication between health care providers."

"Avoiding a trip to the doctor was an obvious benefit," says Huyck. "But getting to know my own results has taught me to make changes early on in order to avoid complications down the road, and that has been an added bonus."

Michael Green, President and CEO, Canada Health Info-way, believes providing patients like Huyck with digital health tools is key to improving access, patient outcomes, and health system efficiencies.

"We can reduce wait times in the emergency department by creating innovative ways to support patients like Huyck, so they can avoid going there in the first place," says Green, who notes Canadians have been quick to adopt the digital health tools that are fueling improved outcomes and health system efficiency.

Remote patient monitoring is one of many examples of projects underway across Canada that are designed to put patients and caregivers in the driver's seat. Here are a few more:

- In Nova Scotia, patients and caregivers are using Canada's first province-wide patient portal to access their lab test results.
- In British Columbia, patients and caregivers who are members of the Cowichan Tribes are managing their health and the health of their loved ones with the help of secure, digital access to their health information.
- In Quebec, women can manage their high-risk pregnancies remotely, reducing the number of in-person visits that would normally be required.

■ In Ontario, patients living with mental illness who find themselves in crisis have 24/7 access to the care they need through a secure, online portal.

■ Across Canada, patients are now more connected than ever before with health care providers thanks to Canada's position as the global leader in Telehealth.

What's more, Canadians stand to regain the priceless commodity of time in appointments rendered irrelevant with the advent of digital health. According to the Conference Board of

Canada, providing Canadians with the ability to consult with care providers, view test results, and renew prescriptions electronically would avoid 47 million in-person visits.

"I have no doubt that Canadians will

usher in the next wave of digital health adoption," says Green. "The vast majority of Canadians, who happen to be savvy web users to begin with, want access to digital health tools and providing it to them will not only enhance their health care experience, it will help propel the digital health-driven benefits to new heights."

That means more patients will benefit from digital health advances that help manage their own illness, just like Huyck.

"Digital health is helping me keep up with my volunteer work, and supports my independence," says Huyck. "But most importantly, it has helped teach me how to manage my health on my own — and kept me away from the doctor!"

Dan Strasbourg

"Digital health is helping me keep up with my volunteer work, and supports my independence."

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