

# Alberta first to offer medical information online

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EDMONTON — Albertans will soon have their personal health information at their fingertips around the clock.

The province is set to become the first jurisdiction in Canada to allow residents to access the often sensitive and private information online.

The Progressive Conservative government plans to start slowly, at first offering only a bit of information such as vaccination records. However, the end goal is to post everything, including prescriptions, X-rays and laboratory test results.

"It's really going to help having all this information in one spot," said Jody Nickerson, a high-school teacher and married mother from Edmonton.

The 32-year-old, who is six months pregnant and has a 15-month-old daughter, Charlie, said it's a lot of work managing her young family's health care with all the appointments, tests and vaccinations. And sometimes Ms. Nickerson doesn't have all the information she needs, including simple details such as Charlie's blood type.

"We are left in the dark a lot about our own health care," Ms. Nickerson said.

Mark Brisson, executive director of information management for Alberta Health, said the province hopes to have the Web portal running within a few months. A budget is still being finalized, and the e-health service will also include educational information on various topics, including nutrition.

He said Alberta spent months researching whether residents of the debt-free province would even want or use the technology. "Anecdotally, you hear, 'I'd like to see my health information,' but really, is that the case? These are not inexpensive exercises to put out that type of infrastructure."

Currently, if people in Alberta want to see their personal medical information, they must make a formal request with their health-care provider.

Mr. Brisson said addressing security and privacy concerns will be paramount as the province builds the new e-health service. He's hopeful that "an incremental approach" will not only build up confidence but also usage.

He said Alberta is in a position to take this step because it's already developed an electronic medical record system accessible exclusively to health-care providers. Every other province and territory is now setting up similar paperless systems.

The nationwide effort has been a massive undertaking, considering that doctors' offices and hospitals have largely worked off millions of paper transactions for everything from physician exams to laboratory and radiology tests. Most of the time, a patient's complete medical record was inaccessible even to the individual's own doctor because it was scattered around in filing cabinets at health clinics, test centres and hospitals.

Health-care experts predict that electronic medical records will cut down on patient waiting times, improve care and reduce errors.

Canada Health Infoway, a non-profit organization set up in 2001, has been spearheading the country's efforts to bring its medical record-keeping into the 21st century.

Trevor Hodge, senior vice-president of the Ottawa-based organization, said the first stage – setting up provincewide electronic record-keeping systems for health-care providers – has taken years because of the size and scope of the project.

He said Alberta is ready to take it to the next level because it started on the first step a lot earlier than most provinces and has a well-funded system. He added that the government's decision to establish it slowly is wise. "It's not going to be something where you just turn on a switch and everything will happen. It's an evolution that's happening."

While Alberta is the first province to offer personal health information online, there are some hospitals across the country that allow patients to access their electronic medical records. Ontario also recently announced a plan to set up a \$150-million electronic diabetes registry to help patients better manage their disease.

Mr. Hodge said it's inevitable that all Canadians will one day be able to sit at a computer and view their personal health information. The e-service will be particularly helpful for people with chronic conditions, he added.

"It won't be that 30 million Canadians will want to access it every day, but there is a good subsegment of the population who will."