



# A prescription for David Caplan

How eHealth could benefit from a good Customer Relationship Management program and the technology to support it *By Emma Warrillow*

**I** was sitting in my doctor's office this morning and saw a sign entitled "Info for Parents" that rather surprised me. The sign said "Every time your child gets immunized, you need to call Toronto Public Health to update your child's immunization records... if you don't call, your child could be given a suspension letter from school." My children can be kicked out of school if I don't phone public health every time they get a vaccination!! Perhaps even more concerning is that self-reported data is enough to get my child off the detention list!

How can it be possible that we have to call to update our records when the healthcare provider must have the correct information in order to get paid for providing the service? It seems obvious that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing in healthcare in Ontario. Our healthcare data is obviously stored in different silos rather than in one central repository. Sound familiar, anyone?

I am certainly *not* intending to wade into the recent eHealth scandal, but it occurred to me (perhaps because I was trying to decide on a subject for my article) how analogous this is to a company without a good Customer Relationship Management program and the technology to support it. Perhaps the Health Minister should take a page from the CRM book as he tries to move this initiative forward.

## The picture of health

On the surface, Ontario Health appears to have it all.

Most of my clients would be thrilled to have (as with the Ontario Health Card) a reliable common identifier and a loyalty card that must be shown at every touch point. eHealth also has executive buy-in and approved funding (at least until the next election). And, from what I read, it also has well-paid (and fed) consultants experienced at this type of implementation to guide it through the process.

However, the current "loyalty program" that requires reporting your "purchases" is like collecting food stamps to be redeemed for free merchandise; it seems archaic when a loyalty card—and a method of "capture" for the information—exists. Electronic capture of the healthcare number at every touch point (doctors, hospitals, labs and possibly even pharmacies) and the consolidation of this information into one database would enable the creation of a 360-degree view of the patient.

Complete patient profiles could help practitioners understand all of a patient

history, not only that from their own interactions. Patients frequently skip information unintentionally because they forget or view it as unrelated. A clear understanding could provide the doctor with all the information at their fingertips. This is particularly relevant as patients often interact with the system in a variety of ways. "Convenience channels," like walk-in clinics, may mean primary care records are incomplete.

For example, knowing that someone visits multiple doctors to get Oxycontin prescriptions could help identify and get treatment for addictions sooner. Missed information can mean incorrect or late diagnoses, resulting in significant costs to the system in both human and monetary terms. While analogous, the importance of missed sales opportunities or inaccurate offer targeting in other industries pales in comparison.

## Identifying efficiencies

CRM initiatives typically include a customer profitability component. Patient profitability may sound like an uncomfortable concept, but the database will help to better illuminate the cost equation. Certain practices may be identified that are costing the system—this could lead to patient education or user fees. One frequently cited example is the trip to the walk-in one night, and a follow-up with the family doctor "because we don't trust the clinic," the next day. Practitioner and patient abuses might be identified or testing protocols changed. Healthcare is a massive cost to the taxpayer and efficiencies benefit everyone.

The data collected by the system could be leveraged through data mining to help eHealth identify adverse drug reactions, relationships between ailments, and common patterns of treatment. Data mining could identify patterns of disease and help to pinpoint environmental relationships or under served areas. This technology has long been used by drug companies in controlled studies, but this would provide the opportunity for impartial wide-ranging analysis.

Data mining could also help identify fraudulent activity—just as it is used by our friends in the credit card world. Surely it would be worth investigating cases where a five-year-old appears to have been prescribed Viagra or a woman has a baby after her hysterectomy! This is not a small problem: Last December, the auditor general estimated that there are some 300,000 more healthcare cards in circulation than people.

Of course, like customer data, patient records will require significant privacy protection. The subjects of data security and governance are not ones that eHealth can afford to take lightly. Due to the sensitivity of this information, the public is understandably concerned that it will get into the wrong hands. The fear is that it will be used to ostracise AIDS patients or those suffering with mental health issues, or that insurers and employers will gain access and use it to deny coverage or jobs.

It sounds like David Caplan and eHealth are really treading on, what is for many of us, some pretty familiar ground. Although the transition won't be easy and it will require careful planning and hard work, done right and with significant controls on the system, the consolidated data source accessible across the healthcare profession could provide enormous benefits.

Ironically, during today's visit, my doctor proudly showed me the practice's new electronic system to track information in the office. No more bulging paper files and scribbled notes to flip through...perhaps there is hope for the profession yet! **DM**

*Emma Warrillow runs Emma Warrillow & Associates Inc. ([www.emmawarrillow.com](http://www.emmawarrillow.com)) a consultancy that enables companies to implement their database and analytic strategies (including CRM) and make the most of their customer data. She can be reached at [emma@emmawarrillow.com](mailto:emma@emmawarrillow.com)*