

**HealthAchieve 2008**  
**President and CEO of *eHealth Ontario* Sarah Kramer's Address:**  
**Harnessing Technology and Innovation for Better Patient Care and Safety**

**Introduction**

Thank you, Graham.

Let me begin by saying how excited I am about working with all of you on the eHealth agenda.

As Graham was saying, I've been really fortunate throughout my career...

From my time in Nova Scotia, and more recently with Cancer Care Ontario and the Wait Times initiative...

To work with really great people.

A philosophy that I've always had ... is that if you work with great teams, and if you believe in your cause, you can accomplish anything.

We don't have to look very far to find evidence of this philosophy in action. Take Ed Brown and the team that built the telemedicine network in Ontario. They are a great example of a team that pursued a vision and, against all odds, built one of the top telemedicine networks in the world.

In the early days of telemedicine in Ontario, there was no funding, no organization, no recognition.

Just a small group of volunteers working under Ed's leadership trying to build relationships between clinicians at Sunnybrook and providers in the northern reaches of our province.

Ed applied to every grant program he could find to get funds to build the links. There was no ongoing operational funding for the first several years. Hospitals had to contribute their own resources to supply the program in their community.

Yet, despite these obstacles, Ed and his team stayed committed to the vision. All of the clinical partners stayed with the group because the team responded to their needs.

Today, the Ontario Telemedicine Network, supported by the Government of Ontario, spans the province and beyond, annually providing over 38,000 remote consultations to those who have no other means of getting top quality medical care. More than 2,000 health care professionals deliver care using OTN and their programs and services are available in nearly 600 sites across the province.

The Ontario Telemedicine Network team has demonstrated what can be achieved by a dedicated group of people inspired by a vision.

We can achieve similar success for eHealth more broadly, here in Ontario. There is no shortage of eHealth talent in this Province.

What we have lacked up until now is a province-wide eHealth strategy to implement and a single organization focused on executing that strategy.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Premier McGuinty about the government's new strategy for eHealth in Ontario. We spoke about the transparency the strategy will introduce into our health care system, and how this will transform health care from the patients' perspective in three ways.

First, it will allow patients to better manage their own health care, giving them the flexibility and the tools to make health care choices that best suit their individual circumstances.

Second, it will help improve patient safety by removing steps where manual errors often occur, such as in the writing of paper prescriptions.

And third, it will bring health care into the post-industrial age where both patients and providers are able to navigate health services more easily and efficiently.

The public –consumers and shareholders of health care - are well ahead of us as an industry. We need to catch up to them. 1 in 8 couples married in the US last year met on the internet, globally two trillion text messages will be sent this year, and my 73 year old father has probably checked his blackberry 7 times since I started speaking. Patience with the need to keep track of little yellow immunization cards, and scribbling down multiple medication orders is wearing very thin.

The strategy is simple to articulate, but as we all know, will be far more difficult to achieve. But it is a goal well worth the effort.

Improving the quality of care and strengthening patient safety will improve the lives of thousands of Ontarians. And we've identified two key priorities to begin - reducing medication errors, and helping to ensure that people with diabetes receive top quality care.

The focus of *eHealth Ontario* will not be devices and wires. It will be people and patients.

That's because the eHealth strategy is about system transformation. Implementing the government's goals for our health system in as efficient and effective a way as possible.

And recognizing that systems can only be successful ... if they serve clinicians who genuinely want to use them.

Our focus is on clinical impact. If patients don't benefit from our systems, then those systems are not worth pursuing.

And if we don't have a method by which to measure our successes, we will never know how much we are improving, and where we need to put additional effort.

So the overall emphasis of eHealth in Ontario is actually quite simple: delivering clear, measurable, transparent *results* ... that improve patient care quality and safety.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize Gail Paech, whose determined leadership brought us to this point. She shepherded the provincial eHealth strategy through to approval by Cabinet in the spring, and subsequently assembled the case for funding and governance reform that led to the announcement of the new Agency a few weeks ago.

We wouldn't be embarking on this new direction today if it hadn't been for Gail's leadership and dedication. I hope you will all join me in showing our gratitude for her achievements leading the eHealth charge over the last two years.

We should also pause to recognize the outstanding work and dedication of everyone who has worked so hard over the years to build an eHealth vision for the province. I look forward to working with all of you to make your vision of a high quality, safe and efficient health system a reality.

And to everyone in the vendor community ... and working in hospitals, health care facilities and health service organizations across Ontario...

Your perseverance has delivered our greatest eHealth success stories to-date - and made an impact on people's lives.

Don't stop. Keep moving forward. *eHealth Ontario* is not looking to replace you. Rather, we'll be looking to you to play a key role in implementing the strategy. Please share your best practices and achievements with the team at *eHealth Ontario* - we need your advice. We will need you to make the eHealth strategy a reality right across the province.

### **The Case for System Transformation**

You know, as Canadians, we don't give ourselves enough credit. There have been so many world-class accomplishments and innovations that have come from our country - and we need to do more to celebrate them.

This is especially true in health care. From Banting and Best to publicly funded health care, we have a lot to be proud of.

In light of these successes, I am especially disappointed when I hear people saying that eHealth is impossible, or that we can't get it done.

That isn't our history. It's not our track record – especially here in Ontario.

When we put our minds to it, we can achieve great things.

And given the building economic pressures, we cannot afford to wait any longer.

We've been planning for a very long time. Now it is time for action.

I'm often asked why progress on this file seems to happen so slowly. And why Ontario seems to be such a hard place to garner enthusiasm about the almost limitless possibilities of eHealth.

I think it is largely a result of our size, and our diversity.

As we look at developing a province-wide system, it has to be designed for 13 million people – over twice as large as Denmark, and three times the size of Alberta.

It has to be able to work with over 100 independently-operated hospitals.

It has to be able to work with our vital community sector that delivers a broad range of client-driven, compassionate care.

It has to be able to work for tens of thousands of health care workers.

And it has to take into account the lack of systems integration that we have today. There are very few consistent business processes or system standardizations with, or between, providers.

Which means they currently can't "speak" to each other in order to share or compare data.

This is not a list of excuses – we simply have to acknowledge the size and state of the challenges if we hope to overcome them.

I have talked to nurses. Home care workers. Health administrators. Specialists.

What I have heard from all of them is that they want to address the inefficiencies in our health system and they are eager for modern, patient-centric technology and information practices.

Because they recognize that in doing so, we will be able to deliver higher standards of patient care.

Let me give you a few examples.

Let's look at diabetes.

Today, about 800,000 Ontarians are coping with diabetes. And while there are very effective strategies to help individuals live with diabetes, only 50% of Ontarians with diabetes receive care according to evidence-based guidelines.

This creates unnecessary trips to Emergency Rooms. Occupies many hospital beds. Burdens overworked clinicians. Increases wait times for patients. Strains the emotional and financial resources of families. And most importantly and tragically, contributes to the early demise of countless Ontarians every year, including my own mother. I am not reluctant to admit that this is very personal for me.

And it's largely avoidable.

The story is the same for medication safety.

Canadians are growing increasingly concerned about what we call adverse events when they interact with our health care system.

Approximately one in every ten Canadian respondents to a recent international health survey reported receiving the wrong medication or dose from a health care provider in the previous two years.

It is estimated that every year, nearly 400,000 Ontarians suffer a preventable adverse drug event.

Four thousand of them will die as a result.

Another system challenge is getting people into the appropriate level of care they need.

Every day in Ontario, more than 1,600 acute hospital beds are occupied by patients waiting for a more appropriate level of care. And the vast majority of those patients –nearly 80% - were admitted to the hospital from the ER.

If we can help change the way people access the health system, through using smart technology that exists today, we can get people the right care. We can build a more efficient health system in Ontario. We can help reduce medication errors. We can help people to manage their chronic diseases more effectively. And we can ensure people receive care in the most appropriate place for their needs.

What's exciting about the technology is that it can make such an important difference in people's lives.

I recognize that changing the system is not easy. It will take a lot of hard work by a lot of people working together for a long time in pursuit of the vision. It is a lot like turning a super tanker around.

But think of even our recent history.

The system can change - to be more patient-focused, efficient and results-oriented.

If we can build a wait times system that reaches into nearly every surgeon's office in Ontario...

Then we have what it takes to execute the eHealth strategy.

And we will.

### **What We're Going to Do Differently**

As we enter this new phase in Ontario's eHealth journey, we are going to have to change the way we do things.

Technology - and the way we use it - has evolved. We don't have to do everything centrally; we will need solutions and ideas that are developed and managed across the province. If we work alone, we won't realize our potential.

We also know that if we focus solely on technology, we won't enjoy much success.

And if we aren't clear what we are trying to achieve, we will lose our way.

Like all of you, I am a great believer in following best practices, and re-applying methods that are proven to work.

Our approach to eHealth will apply what we've learned here in Ontario from the implementation of major change initiatives, like OTN and wait times.

We've learned that we need to focus on the patient, and understand where gaps in care are from the patient perspective.

We've learned that to achieve successful change, we need to work closely with front-line providers and health care institutions.

That means listening carefully to make sure we are meeting their needs.

That means making systems and processes clinically relevant to them, so that we help them to do their jobs better.

And that means rolling things out thoughtfully but intrepidly - making adjustments and improvements every step of the way. Keeping the forward momentum – not waiting for perfection before proceeding.

We've learned that it takes a team. A team of inspired experienced people. Not just within central agencies, but from provider and vendor organizations right across this province.

In order to achieve our eHealth strategy, we will have to depend on the best, most experienced eHealth experts, wherever you reside, and whatever sector you represent. I will call on all of you to offer your best people in pursuit of our goal - very similar to how we achieved the wait times agenda together.

We will need a new level of transparency to build trust between all the groups pursuing eHealth initiatives across the province.

One of our earliest efforts in this regard will be to establish clear indicators that reflect our strategic objectives. These indicators will measure clinical impact (such as diabetes control) clinical engagement (such as how often clinicians are using the systems), and patient engagement (such as how often patients are



reviewing their own records) so we can gauge whether our efforts are having the desired effect. We will report on these regularly, so all will be able to evaluate our progress. And we'll expect you to do the same.

Systems and technology are only effective when people are using them.

I want to take a quick moment to share with you a story of how powerful technology can be - when it is geared to patient needs.

A woman from Guelph was told she would have to wait two months for a CT scan at her local hospital. She went online and searched Ontario's Wait Time Website and found a six-day wait at another hospital, only half an hour away.

She quickly received a referral from her practitioner and found that when she got there, no one else was waiting.

She was in and out ... in five minutes.

We all need to get the message out about how the smart use of technology can dramatically improve health care experiences.

Successful eHealth organizations in Canada and around the world ... have a deep and profound understanding of their customers and audiences.

They nurture relationships with people. They don't let stakeholders feel like interested bystanders - they help them feel like partners who have an interest in their mutual success.

Genuine engagement is the goal. Creating a feeling of ownership of the solutions not just within the *eHealth Ontario*, but among health provider organizations as well.

There must be a seamless ongoing interaction between the eHealth team and providers that begins early in the development process, and carries on well after the "go live" date.

This means talking to people and measuring success at key checkpoints along the way to determine what is and isn't working from the perspectives of patients and providers.

If we follow this philosophy of engagement, and if we continuously ask how any process or system is genuinely helping patients, we will successfully transform Ontario's health system.

I believe that we can be world leaders in eHealth here in Ontario.

But our emphasis will be on what truly matters. Better health outcomes. Improved patient care. Safer health care environments for patients and providers.

That's the promise of eHealth – not as an end in itself, but as one way in which we're going to get the job done.

### **I Need Your Help**

I understand the exceptional challenges and difficulties involved in implementing the eHealth agenda.

The challenge is daunting. It is going to be difficult work. It is going to test the status quo, and require significant changes to the way health care operates in this province. And it is going to require system resources.

Yet, the costs and implications of *not* moving ahead with system modernization are greater than the eHealth challenge before us.

The talent we have here in Ontario is tremendous. And at *eHealth Ontario*, we are going to bring together the sharpest minds. People who have experience implementing successful applications in clinical settings. People who understand how to help clinicians change the way they practice. People with the experience to in delivering results.

This new organization faces the challenge of pursuing goals that will fundamentally change the shape of our health care system. This is what is so exciting. This is what I believe will inspire the best of the best to come together to get the job done.

The line between the work required within *eHealth Ontario* ... and that within *other* parts of our health system ... is an artificial divide. We will need the help of every person in Ontario with eHealth experience and expertise to accomplish our task.

The transformation and modernization of our health system cannot be achieved by any one organization, or any single team.

It will take all of us – working together, pulling in the same direction.

Ontario patients expect this of us. They deserve no less.

Our focus is on making sure we are leading the development of eHealth services in Ontario in a way that makes the health care system accessible, transparent, reliable - and most of all - safe for Ontarians.

Through the eHealth Strategy, Ontario patients will have both the means and the information necessary to participate in the management of their own care. They will be empowered to find the personalized health care solution that works best for them.

If we keep people with diabetes complication free, and if we prevent medication errors that harm patients, we can make the system more cost effective, by taking pressure off acute care organizations.

Success in these areas will establish the foundation for further eHealth success in the future.

If we fail to update and modernize our health system, we won't be able to sustain it in the long term.

The public expects all of us to work together to seamlessly deliver health care excellence, no matter what part of the system we are involved in.

In the coming weeks, I'm going to be meeting with people - hearing ideas and suggestions of people across Ontario. Working together, we will develop detailed action plans that are ambitious yet achievable. And I will put the plans and our progress against them out there for all of you to see.

So please, don't hesitate to let me know your thoughts. Write to me to let me know what you are doing and to give me your advice. If you are working on initiatives related to diabetes and medication safety, let me know.

I want to learn from your experiences and leverage your achievements in other parts of the province. We will need all the help we can get.

It is Election Day in the United States.

And so today, let's take inspiration from the late John Kennedy.

His inaugural address is famous not only for its great words, but also for the ambitious agenda it proposed.

Recognizing the massive amount of work that would be involved in achieving his bold goals, Kennedy said,

*"All this will not be finished in the first 100 days.*

*"Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet.*

*"But let us begin."*

Thank you in advance for your support. I appreciate and need your suggestions and advice.

I look forward to working with all of you to renew, improve, and fundamentally transform the health care system, and make an incredible difference in the lives of the people of Ontario.

Thank you.