



POSITION PAPER

HIGH-RISK COMMUNICATIONS

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUE

Big and small medical events occurring in Canadian healthcare institutions often pose more than a local risk. Yet information regarding many of these remains localized because of inadequate channels for communication across jurisdictions. As a result, the vulnerability of patients and Canadians, in general, continues to be high risk.

Seven years after one of the biggest medical events ever in Canada—the SARS outbreak in Ontario—there is only a moderate level of confidence that a similar outbreak could be contained effectively by the Canadian healthcare system. Add to this hundreds of other critical incidents, adverse occurrences and “near-miss” situations with the capacity to escalate that occur each year and the need for cross-country, high-risk communication channels becomes clearly evident. Patient and public safety are more important than ever in the light of such incidents, which can only be expected to increase in frequency in today’s highly charged, high-risk environment.

Why should governments care about high-risk communications regarding medical events? Information sharing is a critical component of healthcare prevention strategy. Early warning regarding incidents can determine whether a medical event can be nipped in the bud or will spread and grow into a public threat. When it comes to high-risk communications, what is at stake is patient safety, governmental responsibilities to ensure public safety and health care cost containment.

HIROC’S ROLE & INITIATIVES

Promoting patient safety is at the core of HIROC’s mandate. We are working with our partner organizations to contribute to risk reduction, in general, and specifically to reduce the frequency of adverse medical incidents. We are working to establish educational programs, improve measurement and evaluation processes, and proposing changes to tort and subrogation legislation designed to improve patient safety.

HIROC is also the largest healthcare liability insurer in Canada. While insurance is our business, our vision is the safest healthcare system. We work to realize this vision by sponsoring educational programs and events and by partnering with other organizations, institutions and governments. Structured as a reciprocal, our risk management practices are based on risk dispersion amongst our large group of member/subscribers and growth and protection of capital for claims settlement.

HIROC is advocating strongly for dramatic improvements in information sharing within provinces and amongst provinces regarding medical events that may pose threats to patient and public safety beyond local health care areas. Working with our partners—including ISMP and CPSI—we also are advocating for federal government participation and subvention to support initiatives that will make this happen.

Most important, HIROC plans to spearhead a national initiative to establish a task force for identifying the channels and components of a network for reporting events and communicating across jurisdictions. HIROC would play a vital role in this network, serving as a key resource for information related to medical incidents that reach the settlement stage.

POSITION STATEMENT & CALL TO ACTION

HIROC calls on provincial governments to act decisively to remove barriers that make reporting and sharing of information related to medical events virtually non-existent in Canada. For example, only Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Québec have legislation that requires health care institutions to report medical incidents *to the provincial health ministry*. A jumble of jurisdictional restrictions, combined with legislation to protect patient privacy, makes any steps beyond this basic one exceedingly difficult. Yet, the situation calls for immediate action to begin to find a common pan-Canadian approach.

The approach should lead to strategic solutions that would enable local authorities to analyze and learn from medical events within their own jurisdictions, report on these events and share information and learning across jurisdictions. A strategic solution also is needed so that critical incidents and events could be reported to a provincial body—modeled on ones that currently exist in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta—that would share information on these with organizational counterparts in other provinces.

HIROC is prepared to play a start-up role in organizing and participating in a task force to identify appropriate pan-Canadian approaches and legislative and technical requirements in order that a high-risk communications network can be fully functional by 2015.