

OPEN GOVERNMENT

CANADA HEALTH INFOWAY

Canada's Health Infoway is too secretive

We desperately need to change the way our federal, provincial, and territorial laws readily exclude and exempt basic financial and consumer data, avoiding public and Parliamentary scrutiny.



BY KEN RUBIN

OTTAWA—It seems like a long way back that the Harper government promised greater coverage under access legislation of federally-funded agencies. Great Tory PR was made at the time of the Federal Accountability Act's 2007 passage when some agencies like Export Development Canada and CBC were added into the Access Act even though public access to these agencies' records was greatly restricted.

But what about the many other agencies receiving federal monies that are still totally left out of any access to information coverage?

One such agency, the Canada Health Infoway (CHI), begun in 2001, has to date been granted by the federal government \$2.1-billion. Some of that significant pile of cash is just sitting there making interest, but its annual reports note that a great deal of the funds have been committed or spent trying to get a national electronic health record system made operational with provincial help and additional provincial monies.

Recent reports by the auditor general of Canada, provincial auditors, and recent blogs and columns by some medical and media critics have, however, been concerned whether there is sufficient value and accountability for the money being spent by CHI and the provinces. CHI has adopted minimal transparency and accountability rules, so it's difficult to know whether this is one more e-health agency whose flight path has gone off the responsibility radar.

One barometer of any troubled agency, as we now know from the scandalous experience of Ontario's e-health agency, is what it spends on its managers and board and consultants.

The available CHI annual reports' figures show that the then nine-member executive officer team in 2004-05 were earning in aggregate \$2.4-million.

Jump ahead to 2010-11 and the aggregate remuneration for the nine top managers at CHI increased to \$4.9-million as of March 31, 2011.

There is still no federal sunshine compensation law around yet for the disclosure of the salaries of individual officials making more than \$100,000. Last week, my request to CHI for individual executive compensation or details of other expenses was turned down. The 2011-12 CHI annual report is due out this June.

One other controversial expense is the large pension contributions that CHI has been setting aside for CHI's President and CEO, Richard Alvarez. According to the partial information in its annual reports, Alvarez, who came in 2004 from the Canadian Institute of Health Information (CIHI), has been accumulating a sizable pension for his retirement years.

Beginning in 2004-2005, CHI had a pension benefit obligation set aside for Alvarez of \$175,000. But by March 31, 2011, that has already skyrocketed to a special pension actuarial-developed benefit obliga-

tion set aside and actually contributed to Alvarez's pension plan by CHI of nearly a million and half dollars (\$1,446,500).

Requested expenses for the board of directors' remuneration and meetings, and their hospitality expenses were not provided, but senior executive travel and hospitality expenses are now posted for 2011-2012. Consultant costs are not made public either.

Still, it's what the auditors and critics are saying about CHI's handling of the job towards establishing an e-health record system in Canada that is most disconcerting.

For instance, projects like its attempted multimillion dollar e-public health surveillance program, called Panorama, are behind schedule and in jeopardy. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) indicated in its 2010 Emergency Preparedness and Response audit that the CHI Panorama project was not well-connected and integrated and may never be fully implemented. They said, as a result of such deficiencies, that they could not "answer basic questions such as the rate of spread/incidence of H1N1."

In an April, 2010 report, then-federal auditor general Sheila Fraser, along with six provincial auditors, from Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Saskatchewan, indicated their concerns about the haphazard implementation of e-health records. They said that "no province had plans for individual projects that adequately linked to [electronic health record] strategic plans."

The auditors concluded their 2010 report by questioning whether the much-heralded estimated \$6-billion a year in cost savings of going to a e-health records system would really be there, wondered what the multi-billion-dollar total costs would actually be, and whether the electronic health record system, as defined by each provincial jurisdiction and Health Infoway would be 100 per cent operational and available to their authorized healthcare professionals by the stated 2016 goal.

Quebec Auditor General Renaud Lachane, in a 2011 report, expressed concern that the more than \$500-million for the e-health record project in Quebec, known as the Dossier de santé du Québec (DSQ) (which CHI provided monies for) was also way behind schedule and over budget with management problems. Lachane stated that "the initial parameters of the project, costs, scope and schedule, will not be respected. Given these changes, we consider that the project in its originally-defined structure no longer exists and, in this sense, is a failure."

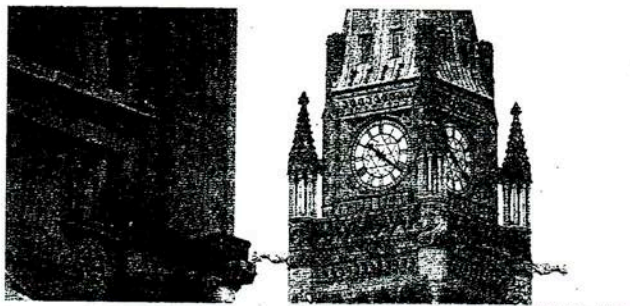
Access to operational records, rather than the glossy statistical charts and soft percentage goals "achieved" graphs that CHI produces, would give the public a better idea as to what CHI is actually accomplishing.

The public and media oversight into CHI's deliberations has been limited. Just this last week at the Chateau Montebello, CHI staged an unpublicized, costly and by invitation-only get-together as its implementation mission enters a crucial point. There, behind closed doors, selective but publicly unknown review data was presented as to how e-health record implementation is going and perceived by CHI insiders.

Such off-limit sessions in no way provides the public the specifics needed to see if CHI's mission of bringing Canada an electronic health record system is anywhere nearer being on time, being better coordinated, and is not going to be even more expensive than Canada's auditors feared it could be.

Some like *Financial Post's* Terrence Corcoran had already concluded in a newspaper column on Sept. 28, 2011, that CHI should be put on the chopping block.

Corcoran questioned, backed by some medical critics, for instance, whether a system of e-prescribing drugs would get off the



More transparency: Parliament's Peace Tower. It's time to stop being so carefree and get the data needed out in the open to examine the financial health of such agencies, writes columnist Ken Rubin.

ground and really be cost efficient and work. He said he believed that CHI's hired consultants, Deloitte, had painted a too rosy picture of expected potential productivity gains.

The Harper government has set some of its least favourite agencies like Rights and Democracy, the National Round Table on the Environment and Economy, and the Assisted Human Reproduction Canada agency.

Parliament itself has a tough enough time dealing with the limited financial data officials provide it for a wide range of agencies and programs. That's become even more apparent with the F-35 fighter billion-upon-billion dollar project cost estimates that are being tossed around. It's an

exercise that more and more is looking like a board game on how to avoid comprehensive accountability and transparency.

So is there room now to more closely examine the multi-billion-dollar Canada Health Infoway agency?

We desperately need to change the way our federal, provincial, and territorial laws readily exclude and exempt basic financial and consumer data, avoiding public and Parliamentary scrutiny.

It's time to stop being so carefree and get the data needed out in the open to examine the financial health of such agencies.

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