



Canada is gearing up to host the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. There, athletes from around the world will strive to do their best in what will be for many of them the greatest competition of their lives.

Back in 2005, in preparation for hosting these games, Canada developed an innovative program called Own the Podium 2010 — aimed at supporting our athletes as they work to achieve excellence at the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. This program involved creating funding strategies and high-performance training programs to ensure world-class maximum performances by Canadian contenders.

Canada needs to make a similar type of commitment to improve the health of its population.

Recently, the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) report *Health Care in Canada 2009: A Decade in Review* highlighted changes in the health of Canadians over the past decade. The report speaks clearly to the need for a more strategic approach to making Canadians healthier. On the one hand, our life expectancy rose from 78 years in 1996 to 81 years in 2006. On the other, risk factors such as obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure increased as well.

U.S. research has shown that obesity rates are growing fast and that the combined health effects of obesity may mean that the current generation of American children will be the first to live shorter lives than their parents. With overweight/obesity rates among Canadian children approaching 30%, many of our kids don't even live active lives — let alone compete for Olympic gold. Mounting obesity rates in the Canadian population must be one of the prime targets in any forward-looking national health strategy.

Another one of the strategic efforts fully supported by Canada's doctors is increasing the application of information technology (IT) to the provision of better medical care. Critical in this, however, is ensuring that doctors, nurses and you, their patients, can access a digitalized point-of-care system that streamlines care

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and improves safety. The key to such a system is secure and confidential electronic patient records that can be accessed by any doctors treating you.

For the Canadian Medical Association, owning the podium in health care would involve improving the use of IT on the front line — in your doctor's office, where you are sitting right now. Physicians and their patients know that health care is fundamentally a locally delivered service; more than 85% of care is provided at the community level by general practitioners, primary-care teams, long-term care and home-care facilities, and local hospitals.

Yet when it comes to resources for health information technology, much of these are invested in centralized areas not involved in the delivery of care. Just as Canada's Own the Podium program targeted funding and training resources directly to our Olympic athletes, let's target IT resources directly to patients and their health-care providers at the point of care.

Canada is one of the most wired nations in the world, and its physicians and patients are ready to apply that savvy to the pursuit of a better national health profile. It's a gold-medal strategy that simply requires a commitment to get IT resources to the places where they'll make the most difference.

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