

Submitted by: Canadian Foundation For Healthcare Improvement

We concur with the premise of the discussion paper that digital health is an essential element of modern healthcare. Indeed, at the 2013 World Health Assembly, countries around the world concluded that:

“it is essential to make appropriate use of information and communication technologies in order to improve care, to increase the level of engagement of patients in their own care, as appropriate, to offer high quality health services, to support sustainable financing of health care systems, and to promote universal access.”

Since there have been a range of studies outlining benefits of – and challenges in – the use of digital health in Canada, our comments below focus on developments during the pandemic.

While digital solutions have the potential to improve access to and quality of care, progress is neither evenly distributed nor guaranteed. Realizing value with health IT is not only – or even mostly – about technology, although the quality and characteristics of solutions and the structure of markets matter. Value tends to depend on new models of care, new workflows, new ways of connecting patients and care providers, and indeed new cultures that digital tools can enable.

This range of factors has been apparent during the pandemic. Across the country, there has been a significant increase in use of virtual care since March, although use stabilized over the summer. In April, 3 in 5 health care visits in Canada were conducted virtually, many by telephone ([Leger COVID-19 Tracking Survey](#)). By August, the rate had fallen to 30%, a level that is still significantly higher than was the case pre-pandemic.

In addition to the imperative to offer alternatives to in-person visits during the pandemic, policy (e.g. by health professional regulators) and funding model changes have facilitated growth in use of virtual care compared to the beginning of the year. Examples of policy innovations have been tracked by the [Canadian Health Workforce Network](#) (project funded by the Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement) and the [Canadian Institute for Health Information](#).

As these examples show, a range of standards, policies, regulations, and legislation affect access to and use of digital health solutions, as well as the extent to which these solutions contribute to high quality, safe care. Out of necessity, many digital innovations introduced or scaled up during the pandemic were implemented quickly. Best practices in solution design/selection, procurement, change management, or sustainability were not always employed because of a desire to move quickly. There are opportunities now to revisit what is working well and where improvements can be made so as to foster the most promising innovations going forward. For instance, this year’s [Canadian Patient Safety Week](#) focuses on opportunities to advance safety in virtual care. Likewise, there are opportunities to tailor virtual care approaches to specific needs and circumstances, such as those in [northern, rural, and remote Canada](#).