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## BEYOND BOUNDARIES: THE MANITOBA FIRST NATIONS REMOTE ACCESS INITIATIVE

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Developing an Aboriginal health workforce and accelerating the use of information technology to improve services in Aboriginal communities was recently ranked by the Health Council of Canada as a top priority for improving and sustaining our health care system<sup>i</sup>.

Adequate education and communication are essential to achieving and maintaining high quality care, job satisfaction and a skilled workforce; however, in today's environment, obtaining access to affordable, ongoing clinical and management supports can be challenging under the best of circumstances. In rural and remote First Nations and Inuit communities, barriers such as geography, climate, distance, and staff shortages further compound these challenges.

The Manitoba First Nations Remote Access Initiative was aimed at demonstrating the value of remote, dynamic access to knowledge and health human resources. The project involved 35 First Nations communities, Tribal Councils and their health services organizations; First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB), Manitoba Region; and Saint Elizabeth Health Care (SEHC), a knowledge and care exchange organization that supports others in enhancing care to individuals and families in their homes and communities.

Funding was provided by the Home and Community Care Program, FNIHB. The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs supported the project and managed its funding. Participants ranged from health directors and program managers to community health nurses, community health representatives and health care aides to administrative and information technology personnel.

Over the period of approximately one year, participating sites implemented and evaluated a secure web-based application known as @YourSide Colleague<sup>?</sup>, which was originally developed by SEHC to transform its own staff orientation and mentoring practices. The application provides a secure professional development and collaboration environment for multidimensional learning experiences, including access to up-to-date learning content, tools and testing, as well as opportunities to interact with experts and peers within online communities of learning. Modules include clinically focused topics such as diabetes care and cardiac care, and personal care and support modules for health care aides. Program management modules for administrators include quality and risk management and program planning and evaluation.

The Manitoba Region includes a diverse mix of communities, which enabled the application to be tested in a variety of settings. In addition to linking health program staff to each other, and to clinical specialists and operations managers at Saint Elizabeth Health Care, a link to staff at the Regional level of FNIHB was also established. Staff at all of the organizations were energized by the opportunity to connect with colleagues beyond their existing networks, share experiences and ideas, and expand their knowledge base.

Sixty three per cent (63%) of the 130 participants who were given access to the application went on to use it; those who did not cited barriers such as infrastructure limitations, including unreliable connectivity, lack of computer access and limited computer skills<sup>ii</sup>. A key lesson here is the central importance of adequate Internet access - regular dial-up or high speed - in order for elearning and ehealth initiatives to take hold and become successful.

Implementation was followed by an external evaluation in June 2004 by Lynda Atack, RN, PhD, a nurse educator who teaches online and conducts research on elearning for health care professionals. Using a balanced scorecard approach, Dr. Atack



Looking across to God's Lake Narrows First Nation, one of the communities that participated in the project.

Saint Elizabeth Health Care has worked with the College of Licensed Practical Nurses and the College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba to have @YourSide Colleague recognized as a means for nurses to demonstrate the requirement of continuing competence. The application is also being used to equip homemakers and other candidates with the knowledge they need to achieve certified Health Care Aide status (similar to the Personal Support Worker

developed a draft evaluation framework, which was presented to key informants for input on evaluation priorities, proposed indicators and methods, as well as any identifiable gaps in the evaluation plan. This helped to ensure it addressed the needs of participants at all levels.

Data collection was through focus group interviews, key informant interviews, surveys, and pre-post knowledge tests. Participants from all sites consistently identified three major themes during focus group interviews regarding the use of @YourSide Colleague; they were: organizational readiness (Internet and computer access, computer skills and sustainable funding for education); transforming learning (workplace support, broader environment); and impact on clients, providers and managers<sup>iii</sup>.

Overall, the study identified three main benefits of the application<sup>iv</sup>, including:

- Rapid, 24/7 availability of information and resources for clinical and program management
- Ongoing, convenient access to up-to-date information on best practices in health care
- Better communication for staff and managers/administrators

Moreover, the evaluation revealed that almost all participants had a very satisfactory learning experience and made significant knowledge gains in areas such as diabetes care, wound management and quality and risk management<sup>v</sup>.

Based on the evaluation, a business case was developed, focusing on the key benefits of contained education costs, enhanced care and education opportunities in the community (leading to an overall reduction in travel and accommodation costs for both community members and providers), and supports for continuing competency.

designation in Ontario, and a requirement for the national First Nations and Inuit Home and Community Care Program). Health Care Aides in Manitoba are finding that @YourSide Colleague is one of the few sources for refreshing and building their knowledge in an ongoing way.

Whereas health providers and administrators once had limited access to professional development opportunities, there is now a convenient and cost-effective way for them to take charge of their own learning and development through an application that is available anytime and virtually anywhere. As such, Manitoba Region First Nations are continuing to use @YourSide Colleague, expanding access to nursing station nurses and other health providers through the funding support of the Regional Home and Community Care Program.

As more First Nations and Inuit communities establish Internet connectivity, web-based access to education and support is becoming a viable, more accessible and affordable alternative to traditional face-to-face access. Innovative solutions are creatively overcoming barriers. Given the Health Council's recommendations, the focus must now be on capacity building and sustainability.

<sup>i</sup> Health Council of Canada, "Health Care Renewal in Canada: Accelerating Change," January 2005, [http://hcc-ccs.com/report/Annual\\_Report/report\\_index.html](http://hcc-ccs.com/report/Annual_Report/report_index.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Lynda Atack, "Manitoba First Nations Region Demonstration Project," August 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> ibid

<sup>iv</sup> ibid

<sup>v</sup> ibid



## FRONT-LINE VOICES: THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION AND CARE

*"For one gal, it was the first time she did anything on the computer. She was scared [at first] but now, you should see her! I am a very strong believer in the power of recognized earned success. It brings out talent and zest for their work."*

*"Now I know how to get in there, I'm excited. I feel like... if I need information about something, I can just post a question and in a couple of days or even the next day, I can get a response."*

*"With the forum, I have to more or less get used to it because I still rely on the Med-Surg textbook... and yet I have this tool right at my fingertips."*

*"You become more aware of informing the client about what they need to watch out for and when to send them in to see a doctor... I have confidence that it's the right thing I'm telling them."*

*"This is the way everyone stays connected. It's very useful at the regional level because everyone is under one umbrella and everyone is in the loop."*

*"Getting people up to speed on state-of-the-art management [and] new clinical practice guidelines, just the day-to-day need is enormous. We hope in some way that it will contribute to more recruitment and retention of health care professions in our rural and remote regions as well."*