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Canada's ePrescription time warp

My one-year-old son recently had an ear infection, so his paediatrician wrote him a paper prescription for some antibiotic eardrops. For most Canadians, this is business as usual. However, having recently returned to Canada after living in the US for several years, I felt like I had gone back in time. In the US, it is common practice for physicians to ePrescribe; that is, send prescriptions electronically to their patient's pharmacy. Canada has been very slow on that front and, today, is woefully behind other commonwealth nations.

- Use of ePrescriptions by physicians has reached 88% in Denmark, 80% in Australia and is nearing 50% in the UK.
- Surescripts, a US company, reported its network carried more transactions in 2014 than American Express (6 billion) and PayPal (4.2 billion).

I took the paper prescription to the pharmacy where my son and I waited in line to drop it off. The woman ahead of us was trying to pick up two prescriptions, however the pharmacy only had one filled for her. After much back and forth and searching through file folders the pharmacy technician found the second misplaced prescription and the woman was asked to wait again while they filled it.

When it was my turn, I handed the pharmacy technician my son's prescription and was told it would be at least a 30-minute wait. As I wandered the store impatiently with a crying baby, I felt annoyed at the lack of service. But, is it really a lack of service, or are pharmacies equally at the mercy of Canada's outmoded method of prescribing medication?

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Rethinking customer service

My experience at the pharmacy was frustrating but not unfamiliar in Canada.

Having a prescription sent to a pharmacy directly by a physician completely changes a patient's experience. Pharmacies are then able to fill prescriptions prior to the patient arriving, and many of them even notify patients when their medications are ready to be collected. I once received a call from my pharmacy letting me know my prescription was ready for pick up while I was still in my physician's office! And, some US pharmacy chains are actually providing curbside service. In the US, my interaction with the pharmacy was focused on them counselling me on the medication, not negotiating how long I had to wait to pick up the prescription.

Reinforcing patient safety

ePrescriptions redefine convenience for patients, but it also positively impacts far more serious matters. They can improve the quality of care delivered to patients and enhance medication safety.

ePrescriptions improve the quality of care delivered to patients and enhance medication safety.

- It is estimated that 30% of prescriptions written in Canada are not filled.
- Non-adherence, either by not filling a prescription or not taking a medication as directed, leads to complications and is estimated to account for 5% of hospitalizations in Canada.

According to a study from the United States, ePrescribing resulted in a 10% increase in prescriptions being dispensed, resulting in better medication adherence by patients.

Canada is ready to implement ePrescriptions

There is really little stopping Canada from moving aggressively forward with ePrescriptions.

1. We have the technology – the vast majority of physicians across the country are now equipped with an EMR.
2. The clinical sector is supportive – the Canadian Medical Association and Canadian Pharmacists Association have publicly stated their support of ePrescription.
3. Patients want digital healthcare and a higher level of integrated care. In fact, according to a recent [study](#), 89% of Canadians believe digital health technology will lead to better care.

I look forward to a day when I can walk out of my doctor's office without any paper, arrive at my pharmacy, and have my prescription waiting for me to pick up. And, I'm sure pharmacists look forward to a day when parents like me, with screaming babies, are not anxiously staring at them waiting for prescriptions!



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