> **(A regionally compatible Electronic Health Record) is an absolute must. It should be automatic. It's onerous for families to communicate that information and it's onerous for health workers. It should be seamless.**
>
> ***Professor Ivy Bourgeault, Canadian Health Workforce Network***

$26 million spent on digital health record incompatible with mainland

By Josh Lewis

josh@peicanada.com



Professor Ivy Bourgeault, who has researched the Canadian health care workforce for 35 years, says compatibility with neighbouring provinces should have been the top priority when Health PEI selected its Electronic Health Record system. Submitted photo



Opposition Leader Hal Perry



Green Party Leader Matt MacFarlane



THE COST OF CARE

Where PEI's Health Dollars Go

For Glen Martell, going to Saint John for emergency heart surgery was one of the most harrowing experiences of his life.

An ambulance was not available for the Georgetown native when the incident happened in late 2022, so he was ultimately transported by LifeFlight.

"I felt like I had two cement blocks on my chest," he said of the moments before calling 911.

Medical personnel in Saint John already had access to his information when he arrived, but for many Islanders that is not the case.

PEI's Electronic Health Record (EHR) system is not compatible with software in both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, where it cost a combined $69.26 million to provide care for Islanders in 2024-25, according to Freedom of Information data obtained by the Graphic.

This lack of compatibility has existed since the first effort to develop an EHR was undertaken by the Binns government in 2006. Since 2019, the provincial government has spent $26 million on EHRs, originally developed by Cerner Canada which is now owned by Oracle.

Regional compatibility should have been the first priority of PEI's EHR, says a University of Ottawa professor who has spent 35 years studying the health care workforce.

"That is an absolute must," said Professor Ivy Bourgeault, who leads the Canadian Health Workforce Network.

Citing the UK, she said every health care provider and patient has been able to access EHR systems for decades.

She stressed the Maritime provinces should have one integrated electronic health record that all providers and patients can access.

Once the patient returns to the Island, it is up to either the physician or the patient to provide updated documentation, such as a discharge summary.

"It should be automatic," Bourgeault said. "It's onerous for families having to communicate that information, and it's onerous for health workers. It should be seamless."

PEI Green Party leader and health critic Matt MacFarlane agreed, saying a regional model only makes sense with so much of our health care delivered in cities across the Maritimes.

"If we have an EHR that only works within our province and fails to consider that our health care system will be collaborative with the region, it's absurd not to see we'll be working in tandem with the other provinces," MacFarlane said. "That's short-sighted and will lead to many more millions spent to rectify it."

As with Martell's case, Health PEI says there are other ways to share information with out-of-province professionals, such as an online cloud service called eFax, secure file transfers, remote access to the province's clinical information system, or via the patient or their family.

However, these all require physicians and other professionals in those provinces to modify how they work to accommodate PEI's system.

While the EHR is a broader tool meant to integrate patient medical information from various sources across the health care system, PEI also has an Electronic Medical Record (EMR) which stores patient information in specific care settings, such as a doctor's office.

In 2021, the province announced it had chosen Telus Health as its EMR provider and spent an initial $8.4 million for implementation.

The documents show only two payments to Telus since then, amounting to about $1.7 million, in October 2024 and January 2025.

However, this may not represent all government payments to Telus. Data provided to the Graphic only covers Health PEI expenses, while the province said at the time the EMR system was being implemented by the Department of Health and Wellness (DHW) in conjunction with Health PEI and others.

In August 2024, Health PEI said all Islanders could have access to their medical records online, likely by late 2024 or early 2025, through a new portal.

DHW spokesperson Maureen Coulter said a pilot phase testing that portal is ongoing. It would give access to components of personal health information and other features.

That contract is separate from the EMR contract with Telus. Questions about the value of the contract, the supplier and a timeline for access were not answered by press time on Friday.

Money sent out of province soars

Martell is one of around 1,000 Islanders sent to Saint John each year for heart treatment, based on data for 2023-24 and 2024-25 provided by Health PEI. The province sent 7,646 Islanders to New Brunswick in total in 2024-25.

More than 13,000 Islanders traveled to Nova Scotia for specialized care not available here in each of those years, including more than 2,000 to the IWK Hospital in Halifax.

After his experience, Martell feels they have no choice.

"The doc said if they didn't send me to Saint John, I would not be alive in the morning," he said. "I can't understand why there's not somebody in Charlottetown who can do that. Because a lot of people go there for stints, not just heart attacks."

Health PEI paid about $214.7 million to the Nova Scotia government for care provided to Islanders over the last six years combined, topping out at $55.9 million in 2023-24, according to the documents obtained. That includes money paid to the Nova Scotia Minister of Finance, Nova Scotia Health Authority and Nova Scotia Medical Services Insurance.

Payments to Nova Scotia spiked by 79 per cent from 2019-20 to 2023-24.

Health PEI also spent $70.7 million on care provided to Islanders in New Brunswick, according to the data, maxing out at $17.76 million in 2024-25. That represents a 57.3 per cent increase from 2019.

Health PEI was not able to confirm this information by press time, nor were spokespersons for the other provinces' governments.

Liberal leader questions Amazon purchases by Health PEI

By Josh Lewis

josh@peicanada.com

Health PEI spent $32,253.21 buying everything from office supplies to baby bottles and screen protectors on Amazon, according to documents obtained by the Graphic through Freedom of Information.

Between January 2023 and January 2024, the agency made 82 Amazon purchases.

The data does not include a description of what was purchased and Health PEI was not able to provide further information beyond the three categories previously noted.

The use of Amazon has drawn the ire of Opposition Leader Hal Perry, who says it shows a lack of transparency and common sense on the part of Health PEI.

"They should know what they bought. Somebody knows," he said. "Yes, it's 2025 and a lot of people do use Amazon, but ... why was government shopping on Amazon instead of supporting local businesses?" asked Perry. "Can we not buy those items locally?"

The first purchase of $1,168.18 was made on January 25, 2023, and the last order on January 8, 2024 totalled $80.26. The biggest order occurred on April 24, 2023 for $1,959.47.

It does not appear any Amazon purchases were made after January 2024.

Health PEI offered no insight into why the purchases were made or why they stopped.

However, a former senior government employee who made procurment decisions for many years says Amazon purchases are commonplace in government. On price checks, it is often the most affordable solution with the quickest delivery, the person said.

Local purchases involve paying the employee their hourly rate plus mileage. Also factored in is the work they could be doing with that time instead, the former employee said.

Due diligence was still done on pricing comparisons, and efficiency, transparency and fairness are factors that must be considered, said the source, who made such decisions on a daily basis.

Government contracts with suppliers go through the comptroller's office, but as a Crown corporation, Health PEI has its own procurement policies contained in an online document system with access restricted to the public.

Those policies should come in for more scrutiny than where items are purchased, the source said.