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New Zealand goes all guns blazing on eHealth

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Aiming at achieving high quality healthcare and patient safety through integration of information and technology (IT) at all levels of healthcare delivery, New Zealand is looking at implementing eHealth across the country. Under ehealth system, an individual's health information is to be collected, stored and made accessible as and when needed by the health professionals as well as individuals. The health information would include the individual's demographics, allergies and alerts, wellness checks and interventions such as screening and immunization, and a register of where other health information is stored for the person.

The objective is to create a system in the country under which an individual's personal health information is made available electronically, which can be accessed the healthcare providers. According to the plan, the information will be recorded in digital formats throughout the health system, and personal health information, through electronic health records (her), will be made available across healthcare organizations.

National Health IT Board, an arm of National Health Board, is driving the digitization project and has streamlined plans for IT investments in healthcare infrastructure to strengthen service delivery from primary and community level to public and private healthcare operators.

"New Zealand's future health service is approaching towards clinically driven innovative models with integration of IT infrastructure, that would enable patient centric healthcare, patient self management and a well defined patient-doctor collaboration," says Mr Graeme Osbourne, director, National Health IT Board.

Talking about the benefits of having floating health information, Mr Osbourne says that by following the new system, people in New Zealand will be more involved in their personal health information and healthcare providers will be able to optimize their resources and focus on the delivery of quality healthcare. "We are looking at building a system that has an individual's health information at its base and there is an effective and secure system for sharing information with physicians, clinicians and healthcare providers, that ensure continuity of care even when a patient switches between doctors or hospitals," explains Mr Osbourne.

Dr Niger Miller, chief medical officer, Canterbury District Health Board, and a member of New Zealand's National Health IT Board, has been involved in the implementation of IT projects in the healthcare sector. Elaborating on shared healthcare information plan of New Zealand, he says, "Availability of individual's clinical information, such as laboratory results, medications and other clinical documents, allows clinicians to make the best treatment decisions and the information can be shared among community clinics and hospitals. The Health IT Board is working towards creating an environment where clinical data is stored securely, can be viewed by health professionals and in a case where a patient requires special care or there is a switch of doctors, their information is made available and shared between health professionals and with the individuals themselves."

In order to develop a well-knit healthcare IT infrastructure that delivers hassle free service to 4.4 million New Zealand population, the strategists are calling for a collaboration and coordination among innovators, entrepreneurs, clinicians and healthcare delivery companies to join hands and implement IT infrastructure, technologies, framework, architectures for an integrated approach. New Zealand has initiated alignment of the new IT-enabled healthcare infrastructure with the existing structure at community level and it will be evaluated before deploying it at a larger scale. To start with, the National Health Board will implement the system at District Health Boards, enabling information to be shared between community and hospital health services, and then, gradually, the network would grow to connect all the hospitals of the country.

"New Zealand has huge IT implementation as there is a vision of creating electronic health record and unique patient record. This is has to be implemented at a lower cost and a lower risk model," said Mr Mark Capill, regional manager Asia, Orion Health, IT solution provider in health domain.