

# A Virtual Care Community

By Sarah Sweet



**C**hronic diseases are the leading cause of death and disability in this province. Nearly 80 percent of Ontarians over the age of 45 suffer from a chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes, and arthritis, and as the population ages, the challenges involved in caring for this large and diverse population will grow – and so too will the economic burden on the health care system. In Canada, it is estimated that chronic conditions already account for approximately \$90 billion annually in direct health care costs and lost productivity, and that number is expected to increase.

Courtney Cole knows the realities behind the statistics. A business executive and entrepreneur with more than 20 years' experience in diverse fields, he has had first-hand insights into the way our health care system approaches the management of the chronically ill. "With a background in health



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care and technology," he says, "I've had the opportunity to interact with patients and clinicians at hospitals within Ontario. I saw opportunities and identified several gaps in terms of access to care, and I saw how

**"Patients can empower themselves to give meaningful and accurate assessments of their treatment and where they are in their care."**

patients' knowledge of chronic conditions and the decisions they make affect their quality of life." Chronically ill patients and their caregivers confront a complex and intimidating set of circumstances: they often see a variety of specialists, going from one doctor to another while trying to manage multiple symptoms, prescriptions, and lifestyle changes.

But studies show that informed patients with access to consistent and supportive care have better health outcomes and fewer readmissions. Cole saw an opportunity to improve lives while reducing health care costs, and in 2012, he founded ForaHealthyMe.com.

ForaHealthyMe.com harnesses technology to enhance the care patients receive when they're not in a medical facility. The resource, which is most often prescribed by physicians, is designed to support patients diagnosed with high-impact chronic conditions. The web-based and mobile platform acts as a management and education hub: patients can create calendars and tracking charts, and access clinician-validated information about their illnesses. "Patients can empower themselves to give meaningful and accurate assessments of their treatment and where they are in their care," Cole explains.

The company has also recently expanded its virtual care capabilities, adding a telemedicine component that enables secure video-based consultations between patient and physician. "We're giving clinicians more tools to reach and care for patients while they're away from hospital," Cole says. "Many patients live in remote locations and have issues with transportation, and this way, a clinician can schedule virtual follow-ups and be more efficient."

The ForaHealthyMe.com approach, with its emphasis on informed patients and a virtual community of care, has the potential to ease the pressures on the health

care system. "It results in a lower cost for the health system in general," Cole says. "You get a better use of clinicians' time in terms of engaging and educating patients, efficiencies that can be realized through

the use of telemedicine and improved workflows when it comes to patient onboarding, management, and discharge."

But its benefits to the health care system extend beyond cost savings and efficiencies. Using aggregated and de-identified data – the confidentiality of patients' personal details is strictly maintained in accordance with the government's privacy guidelines – ForaHealthyMe.com supports research involving a variety of chronic conditions. "We conduct research into health outcomes or public awareness of certain conditions in order to shape policy and investigate how to use knowledge

to improve outcomes for patients," Cole explains, pointing to projects the company has undertaken on peripheral arterial disease and chronic kidney disease with partners at St. Michael's Hospital and York University's Faculty of Health.

The company has already garnered support from government funding agencies such as the Ontario Centres of Excellence and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. It has also been accepted into the Canadian Technology Accelerator Initiative, run by the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service, which provides innovative Canadian startups with support and resources to compete in U.S. and global markets. Cole himself was the recipient of ventureLAB's 2015 W. Daniel Mothersill BUILD Award, which honours exceptional entrepreneurs for accomplishments in the previous year.

ForaHealthyMe.com has primarily partnered with health care institutions in Ontario, but Cole sees the potential for continued expansion: "This is a knowledge-based industry that will drive economic growth within Markham, the province, and, hopefully, across the country." ▣

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