



Ottawa-area facilities develop web system for rehabilitation referrals

Conrad Amenta

There's a new way for facilities in the Champlain District of Ontario to send rehabilitation referrals to each other and for community physicians to access rehabilitation specialists and services – online, using the Rehabilitation Integrated Transition Tracking System website (www.ritts.ca).

Responding to the demands of health care providers for mandatory and legible medical information on rehab referrals, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care funded the RITTS pilot project, whose goal is to research the strengths and weaknesses of existing referral practices and develop a free web-accessed referral tool.

The resulting website, developed at The Rehabilitation Centre, is designed to streamline the current paper-based process for sending and receiving inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation referrals by placing it online; to eliminate incomplete referrals, unnecessary resending of information, and the reentering of patient information on each referral; to provide one convenient, standardized referral format that tailors itself automatically to the type of referral being sent; and finally, to store sent and received referrals for future reference in a personal database that can be read and edited by the RITTS user from any computer with Internet access.

Dr. Daniel DeForge, MD Psychiatrist in Chief at The Rehabilitation Centre and Principle Investigator for the RITTS Project, stated that, “Before the RITTS was developed, the vision we were working from was of a system that could provide a consistent, standardized referral process. Too often facility staff members are expected to place follow-up calls to get the information they need to deal with a referral. We knew there had to be an easier way than that.”

The RITTS project predicts the result of their research and development will be a more efficient, cost-effective referral process that saves the user time while increasing patient access to quality care. Its long-term goal is to better integrate rehabilitation services throughout the Champlain District of Ontario with primary care providers, spanning acute care to community care.

The RITTS website was created on the basis of two previously developed referral tools, the Stroke Coordinated Referral Initiative Pilot (SCRIPT) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) projects. Both provided the conceptual inspiration and research basis for the RITTS website.

“The RITTS is not a purely developmental project,” says Project Manager Nadereh Mohajer. “It was intended to be, first and foremost, a research project to gather information about how rehab referrals are sent and received. The developmental aspect came later. This has made it difficult to baseline the project because the scope of details involved is so broad.”

Fundamentally, one of the most important aspects of the website is that it enables its users to consistently provide adequate and legible information. “The most immediate and obvious benefit of the RITTS,” says Jane Sutherland, Research Coordinator, “is its ability to deliver a referral that is easy to read. The content is clear, it



Rehabilitation Integrated Transition Tracking System

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is in a standardized format and it ensures that complete information about the patient gets to the receiving healthcare professional.” It is this kind of attention to the details, uncovered during research, that may see health care providers embracing web-accessed tools like the RITTS website.

Here’s how it works: The user accesses the RITTS at www.ritts.ca through a standard web browser, like Explorer. On the RITTS website, the user adds their patient’s information to their private patient list or searches for patient information added by another user. From there, a physician or a member of a physician’s support staff may select a patient to refer and, using an easy, point-and-click interface, selects the rehabilitation service type and diagnostic category. The medical questions that then appear are automatically tailored to the type of referral being made. The admitting staff at the receiving facility then receives an automatically generated e-mail notifying them of a referral’s arrival, and use the RITTS to forward or redirect the referral to a physician or support staff. E-mail is again used to notify the receiver. Finally, when the receiver makes a decision on whether to accept the referral, an e-mail notification of the referral’s status is returned to the sender.

The concept of a web-accessed referral tool is increasing in popularity. Gradually, the notion of sending referrals online is being seen by many as a practical option than can work in many service areas with minimal adaptation. As health care providers become more comfortable with online tools and use them more often, they will see that they can actually be far safer, more secure and cautious with patient information than faxing and mailing. Or, as the project team argues, it is becoming more likely that the RITTS will be seen as a feasible alternative to what exists now.

In fact, information security is one of the RITTS Project’s primary concerns. The RITTS website adheres to all the standards of safe and secure internet information transfer, including SSL encryption and password-protected accounts. A RITTS Project member confirms the certified status of all physicians and support staff registering with the RITTS by contacting them and confirming their information. And finally, all searches for patient information are tracked by RITTS Project staff to ensure appropriate use of the patient search function. (For more information about RITTS security protocols, you can visit the ‘Security’ section of the RITTS FAQ under the Help tab on www.ritts.ca.)

There are currently over 100 registered RITTS users, including physicians, their support staff, facility admitting staff and ward clerks. Unregistered users may still use the RITTS website to send referrals, but their referrals must first be checked by a project team member first. Unregistered users cannot use the website to receive referrals. There are 23 facilities currently on the RITTS website, 7 of which are fully integrated and capable of sending and receiving rehabilitation referrals using the RITTS website, including all of The Ottawa Hospital sites

The RITTS project team is currently gathering feedback from its users regarding the performance of the system in order to assess the degree of user satisfaction. This feedback, along with determining whether the RITTS has made strides towards its goals, can also be used to draw conclusions about the feasibility of using web tools to send and receive rehabilitation referrals in the Champlain District. The team hopes to continue expansion of its user base throughout the Champlain District of Ontario to include health professionals beyond MDs. Hundreds of physicians and support staff throughout the Champlain District have been contacted and encouraged to visit www.ritts.ca to read more.

“I believe that a system like the RITTS will ultimately lead to more efficient communication between health



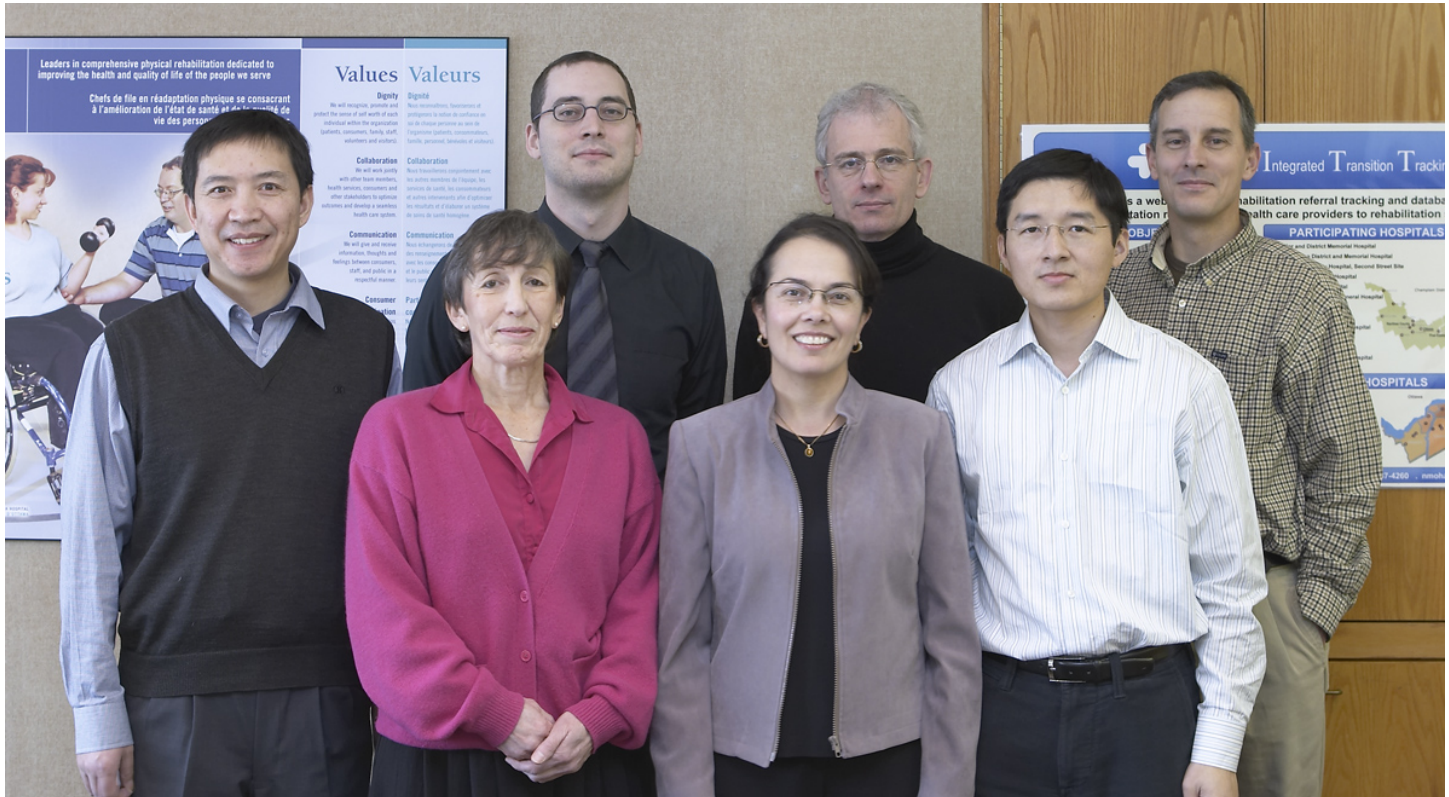
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care professionals and has the potential to assure that current and comprehensive health information can be shared,” says team member Dr. Shawn Marshall, MD, MSc, FRCPC and Associate Professor at the Department of Medicine at the University of Ottawa. “Ultimately, I would like to see this system lead to a standard way of completing a patient referral, which will allow for more timely scheduling and overall efficiency.”

*For more information about the RITTS website, its mandate and goals, please visit www.rittts.ca and click on the **About RITTS Project** link on the homepage.*



The RITTS Project Team:

Front row from left: Jian Zhang (Application Architect), Jane Sutherland (Research Coordinator), Nadereh Mohajer (Project Manager), Fangwei Zeng (Senior Developer)

Back row from left: Conrad Amenta (Web Content Manager), Dr. Dan DeForge (MD, Physiatrist in Chief at The Rehabilitation Centre, Principle Investigator), Dr. Shawn Marshall (MD, MSc, FRCPC, Associate Professor at the Department of Medicine at the University of Ottawa), Absent - Zhu Tian (Developer)