

Grab control of health records

Having information on hand helps when adversity strikes

Tom Keenan

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Most people are not very organized when it comes to personal medical records.

And, in my humble opinion, men are even worse than women. Perhaps it's because we have better things to do than keeping a health journal. Things like hunting, fishing or backcountry snowboarding.

So when a guy shoots himself in the foot, catches a fishhook in the ear or breaks a leg, odds are he's not gonna know when he last had a tetanus shot.

As for the date of that last cholesterol or prostate specific antigen test, and the results, "uh, ask my doctor" is the usual cop-out.

But with people moving around and baby boomer doctors retiring, it behooves us to take control of our medical records. And what better time than the start of a new year?

Alas, it's easier said than done. What medical data should we be recording? Where do we get it? How do we organize it?

Luckily, two Calgary entrepreneurs have put their considerable expertise into a personal health and lifestyle journal called *Vitality & Vitals*.

Beverly Whitmore and Lorna Milkovich have health credentials (registered dietician and registered nurse) as well as MBA degrees, so their \$26.95 book is a lot more than a simple log of vaccinations and operations.

The *Vitality* section features topics such as *Recharge Your Eating Habits* and *Rethink Alcohol, Tobacco and Drugs*. Some men may find it a bit preachy, and even simplistic. After all, only a cave-dwelling hermit would fail to know "smoking makes people sick."

However, the book supports its common sense advice with cheerful factoids. We learn, for example, that after quitting smoking, in eight hours your oxygen increases to a normal level, and in one year, your risk of heart attack is cut in half.

The *Vitals* section provides space for logging treatments, medications and tests -- even those men only ones, like the digital rectal exam and PSA test. It might have been handy to provide space for several family members, but this could lead to confusion, as in "who got the hearing aid in 1998?"

Milkovich says the book was inspired by experiences such as having three family doctors in three years, and people saying things like "I didn't realize

that adults need to get vaccinations."

Philosophically, they've put the emphasis on short-term, practical goals, such as Get More Energy. While they tell you to cook light and simple and don't skip breakfast, they've avoided endorsing any particular diet regimen.

If keeping health records on your home computer is more appealing, there are lots of options. The Body Journal (www.bodyjournal.com) allows you to document just about everything health related for an entire family. It will set you back \$49.99 in U.S. funds, even though the company behind it, Berkeley Medical Inc., is based in Toronto.

They offer a 30-day free trial on their website, and you can even import readings from devices such as blood sugar meters through your home computer.

Just a warning: this program is clearly targeted to the U.S. market, and there are some differences, such as proprietary drug names, between Canada and the U.S.

The Body Journal's most innovative feature is a wallet card that allows emergency room personnel to access some of your medical records online. It comes with this service for one year, after which there are extra charges. And, of course, you'd better hope the emergency room doctor or ambulance attendant finds the card, has Internet access and is willing to take the time to read your file.

There are issues of privacy when you store your personal medical data on somebody else's computer. Berkeley Medical says it "stores all health information on users' home computers. Users can decide what to publish to a secure private web server."

Of course, if you want the emergency room staff to see your medical history, you'll have to allow it to be accessible via the Internet.

A competing service from the U.S.-based iHealth Alliance stores your data on their computers, but they promise not to sell or share it without your permission. Since this outfit is chaired by Dr. Nancy W. Dickey, past president of the American Medical Association, it's probably pretty reputable. Their website, www.ihealthrecord.org, even supports online consultations with your doctor and provides automatic notification if a medication you are using is recalled.

At the end of the day, how you record and organize your medical records is probably less important than just deciding to do it. Make time to collect all your health related data in one place and tell your family where to find it.

That way, if you fall off the ladder taking down the Christmas lights, they won't be scrambling to remember your blood type and whether you're taking Ventolin or Viagra!

Tom Keenan, I.S.P., is an award-winning science writer, professional speaker and professor at the University of Calgary.