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ACTION for Health Backgrounder

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ACTION for Health

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Technology's role in the health sector has been a key research focus of communication professor Ellen Balka for the past several years.

Her \$3 million, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Initiative for the New Economy funded project is formally titled, The role of technology in the production, consumption and use of health information in varied settings: implications for policy and practice, and more commonly known as the ACTION for Health Project (Applied Communication Technology: Information, Organizations, and Networks). The project has expanded on previous work and allowed her research team to further investigate the design, use and effectiveness of technology in the health sector, in order to inform the design of policies and new technological systems.

The need to better understand the role of health information technologies was also identified in a number of reports about the nation's health care system, including the Romanow and Kirby reports, and more recently in *Listening for Direction III*, from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. "One of the goals of our research is to better understand the problems that occur as new technologies are introduced into health settings," says Balka. "We hear far too often that a new computer system has made work more difficult --- our goal is to learn more about the contexts in which technologies are used, so that new technologies can be designed to better meet users' needs."

Balka says health care has been increasingly subject to computerization while use of the Internet as a source of health information continues to grow, leading to concerns about how information is interpreted as well as limits to access. Researchers have investigated whether or not existing Internet delivery of health information and the growing computerization of health care jobs achieve desired results, such as equitable access to health information leading to improved health, and employment situations that make it easier to deliver high quality patient care.

Balka is also a senior research scientist with the Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute. She was the recipient of a 2003 YMCA woman of distinction award and a 2007 Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research Senior Scholar Career Investigator Award. She continues to carry out research related to gender, technology and communication.

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