A new tele-radiology reading service, called Real Time Radiology Canada, has been launched in Canada to provide expert reading of diagnostic images to hospitals and clinics.

The service is a response to the dire shortage of radiologists in some areas of the country – which has resulted in reading and reporting delays of days or even weeks. In turn, that has meant delayed decisions and treatment for many patients, particularly in rural areas of Canada.

The company has been two years in the making and started with the working name of CanadaRAD. That name was recently changed to avoid confusion with a similar-sounding service. And while Real Time Radiology was slated to officially start in January of this year, demand for its services was already so great that it started work in December, completing its ‘go live’ ahead of schedule.

“This is the first, Canadian-driven, national teleradiology initiative in the country,” commented Ian Maynard, CEO of Real Time Radiology, formerly of GE Healthcare and a twelve-year veteran of the Picture Archiving and Communication System (PACS) marketplace.

Already, 20 radiologists have signed on with Real Time Radiology, “making it the largest independent group of licensed Canadian radiologists practicing teleradiology in Canada,” said Maynard. The company expects the number will increase to 50 in two to three months. Maynard says the business plan calls for bringing on as many as 500 radiologists within five years. “This will provide on-site radiology capacity. They must attract and equip additional staff with the necessary IT infrastructure, or pay the associated travel, living and accommodation costs to fly in additional radiologists to serve their community.

Flying in a radiologist is often expensive, inconvenient and an inefficient use of the radiologist’s time.

Use of Real Time Radiology, says Maynard, will result in improved medical care for patients across the country. “We’re providing improved access to care and equalization of service, especially for patients in remote communities,” he said. Maynard noted there are some regions where a radiologist only visits every couple of weeks, and referring physicians and patients must wait for their studies to be reported. Other regions simply don’t have as many radiologists as they need, which is also a problem. When these radiologists leave for the day, go on vacation or get sick, referring physicians and their patients simply have to wait – and the level of medical care suffers.

However, using this secure teleradiology service, images can be transmitted to radiologists in every region, province and territory with better and broader options for backup coverage from colleagues licensed to practice in their jurisdiction.

Typically, small hospitals and clinics must incur large costs to augment their radiology capacity. They must attract and equip additional staff with the necessary IT infrastructure, or pay the associated travel, living and accommodation costs to fly in additional radiologists to serve their community.

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Real Time Radiology’s data centre where they are routed for reading to credentialed radiologists. What’s more, the system allows the radiologists to work from any part of the country, at any time of the day or night and even from their homes.

“The goal is that no exam goes unread for any significant period of time," said Maynard.

The radiologists maintain their affiliations with their own organizations, such as hospitals and independent imaging centres, and provide interpretations in off-hours, evenings and weekends. A subscribing Real Time radiologist is paid for every exam read.

“Radiologists are able to practice on their own terms," said Maynard. "Many have told us that they welcome the opportunity to be paid for exactly what they read in their off hours, thereby supplementing their income. It’s one of the reasons we’ve seen such a high pre-launch and pre-advertising subscription rate.”

One may wonder, given the longstanding shortage of radiologists in many Canadian communities, why a service of this sort hasn’t been launched before.

The answer, said Maynard, is that it required the creation of a service and technical infrastructure on a national scale. Most teleradiology companies are regional 2-5 person operations with limited capacity.

And while point-to-point teleradiology has occurred in Canada before – typically involving a hospital and a specific radiology group – no one in Canada has ever created a system that allows any number of hospitals and clinics to interact with a large number of radiologists licensed to practice in their jurisdiction.

Real Time Radiology has created its own workload management, coverage request and response system. “It includes automatic routing of exams based on the applicable jurisdictional credentials of the radiologist, their capabilities and subspecialties, along with their scheduled availability,” said Maynard. “The system can also respond to unanticipated on-demand requests, providing radiologists and the institutions they serve, with an unprecedented real time resource.” The creation of this system constitutes a significant innovation on the part of Real Time Radiology.

“We can have 50 different senders, generating studies at all hours of the day and night," said Maynard. "We have the capacity to handle this because of the scale of the service”.

The compensation model is also new for Canadian teleradiology. Other services typically require radiologists to leave their current place of work and commit to a full-time position.

At Real Time Radiology, radiologists can continue to serve their current institution and provide services on a per exam basis.

Real Time Radiology was launched by a team that includes Mr. Ian Maynard, as well as radiologists Dr. David Koff, Dr. Nadine Koff and Dr. Greg Butler.

The company recently announced a multi-year, multi-site contract win to provide evening, night, weekend and on-demand coverage to the Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance.

In addition to providing teleradiology services across Canada, international hospitals have requested the company’s services.

“Canadian radiologists enjoy outstanding reputations internationally and are thought of as providing uncompromising quality and good value,” said Maynard.

“This is the first, Canadian-driven, national teleradiology initiative in the country,” commented Ian Maynard.