

# Healthcare CANADIAN Technology

## Multi-vendor approach, using middleware, reduces price of hospital info systems

By JERRY ZEIDENBERG

When Heron Technology Corp. (HTC) bid to supply a computerized information system to the Riverside Health Care Facilities in Fort Frances, Ont., it was up against two of the largest developers of hospital software in Canada.

Nevertheless, Heron won the contract by offering a new way of providing a complete hospital information system, one that cost about 50 percent of the price quoted by the other contenders.

"The total cost of \$750,000 was half of what the two others were proposing," said Ron Hébert, chairman of Markham, Ont.-based Heron Technology, a specialist in financial software for hospitals.

What Heron suggested, and has now installed at the three sites making up the Riverside organization, was a "multi-vendor" system in which several companies provide the software needed by the healthcare facilities.

Heron banded together with 11 other software companies and created an integrated solution that includes accounting, patient administration, health records, human resources, diagnostic imaging, pharmacy, materials management, laboratory, maintenance, rehab and case costing.

The partners include: Heron Technology, Integrated Hospital Solutions of Brampton, Ont., Cactus Systems of Milton, Ont., Computerease of Halifax, Epix of Montreal, TechnoLabs of Markham, Ont., Crown Software of Texas, Coopers & Lybrand of Toronto, and InfoMed of Vancouver.

Heron's cluster of software systems are

connected by using an interface engine called "FITS" from Stratsys Corp. of Toronto. Its customers include Nortel and lab-industry giant MDS Corp.

The interface software — sometimes called middleware — allows hospital staff members working with one component, say health records, to tap into human resources or lab applications. In this way, it acts like all-purpose glue, bonding every software module.

Middleware also gives a hospital some financial flexibility, since it allows managers to pick and choose the software

engine vendors, such as CAI, STC and HCI, because of the Toronto company's flexible pricing and locally based product development and support groups. Moreover, the product was a good fit, since the Stratsys software will run on low-cost Intel computers, as does the software marketed by Heron and its partners.

Heron's group won the Riverside contract in March, 1996, and the first application was launched in April. The rest of the modules were up and running by September. According to Riverside, the system was relatively easy to install and is working well.

That helps explain why Heron has sold two more middleware systems since then — to the Lennox-and-Addington Hospital in Napanee, Ont., and the Powell River General Hospital in Powell River, B.C.

Hébert forecasts sales of 10 more systems over the next year. HTC currently has bids in with 30 hospitals, including the 500-bed Thunder Bay Regional Hospital.

On the international front, Heron's multi-vendor approach helped it win a US\$300,000 contract in Jamaica last November. Under this deal, Heron will provide patient administration software to five hospitals across Jamaica.

While the contract is for Heron's software alone, the Markham, Ont. company has already brought in its Canadian partners to expand the scope of the information systems, and to extend the network to 15 more hospitals on the island. If the group gets the go-ahead, the various software systems would be connected — across all of the hospitals — by the Stratsys interface engine. ■

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modules they can afford. No reason to buy the Cadillac of diagnostic imaging applications if a Chevy will do.

"Why spend \$80,000 on a pharmacy system if you can spend \$15,000 and get what you need," said Hébert. He calls this type of purchase 'best-of-budget', as opposed to 'best-of-breed'.

By contrast, he notes that if a hospital is buying all of its software from a single vendor, it's not usually given a variety of choices on price and capabilities of various modules.

Hébert said he's working with Stratsys rather than the more established interface