

Digital health to transform Australia's health system and save lives

MEDIA RELEASE

Australia now has many of the building blocks in place to roll out a digitally enabled health system that could transform care services, an expert report has found.

The report, developed after an expert roundtable initiated by the Consumers Health Forum and The George Institute for Global Health, says "the time is now ripe" to support the expansion of digital health technology in vital areas including chronic care and residential aged care.

The report is based on discussions held by around 40 consumers, clinicians, academics, government and industry supported by the Australian Digital Health Agency.

Roundtable attendees considered four sectors --- chronic care, residential aged care, emergency care and end of life care --- in terms of what is wanted from digital health, the current state of digital health in that sector and how to meet goals for the future.

The report says major progress is being made with My Health Record, e-prescriptions, patient registries, shared care portals, state-based digital health strategies and linked hospital patient information systems.

"The time is now ripe to leverage this maturing digital health capacity in ways that are meaningful to both consumers and providers. If done well, it has potential to be transformative for Australia's health system bringing about rapid enhancements in quality, safety, accessibility and efficiency," the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

"Digital disruption is not coming in health care – it is already here. For too long health has been lagging behind other sectors.

"For Australia to embrace digital health and benefit from its huge potential, we need national leadership. The COAG National Digital Health Strategy provides a foundation but what is needed is stronger, coordinated direction from the federal, state and territory governments.

“It would be good news for consumers to bring health into the 21st century but we need to be mindful that people have differing levels of health literacy and some will need support to embrace a digital health future or we risk inequities of access and knowledge

“We need to invest in implementation and change management to avoid the risks and pitfalls that can accompany the roll-out of such powerful technology into a complex and sensitive area like health care,” Ms Wells said.

Professor David Peiris, Director of Health Systems Science at The George Institute, said emerging digital health strategies had the potential to transform Australia’s health system for both health care providers and consumers.

“Our report sets out clear recommendations on what is needed to enable people to be much more in control of their own health needs and to make informed choices about the care they choose – from urgent life-saving situations through to respecting their wishes at the end their life.

“We also want to ensure that every health professional in Australia can take full advantage of the digital health eco-system to improve people’s healthcare experience and provide care that can be co-ordinated across the system. Many Australians are tired of having to constantly repeat their story to multiple care providers and it’s vital that we tap into digital technology to ensure we deliver a more person-centred, safer and sustainable healthcare system.

“Australia has made a great start in its uptake of digital health technology and we have identified practical steps in several areas that could be rolled out rapidly. The challenge now is to ensure they are adopted.”

The recommendations identified by the roundtable included:

In chronic care: To trial virtual care teams to support patients with high care needs; and trial a “Patients Like Me” platform to enable patients with chronic and complex care needs to safely connect and share experiences with one another.

In residential aged care: Ensure that residents’ health and social services information is available in a single location, on a platform easily accessible by consumers and providers anywhere, anytime and on any device. Collate and publicise data that allows patients, their

carers and future consumers to compare residential care facilities based on health outcomes and patient experiences.

In emergency care: Develop digital health technologies that leverage My Health Record data to be rapidly accessible to paramedics and other emergency providers; develop a text/image message system to support improved communication between emergency care and other medical teams and assist with referrals to other health care providers for post-discharge care.

In end of life care: Develop and promote existing professional and consumer portals that provider information on care options, medical services and pathways for those nearing end of life; and engage in targeted social media campaigns to encourage consumers and medical professionals to normalise conversations about death.

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Consumers Health Forum of Australia

The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) is the national peak body representing the interests of Australian healthcare consumers. CHF works to achieve safe, quality, timely healthcare for all Australians, supported by accessible health information and systems. CHF is committed to being an active advocate in the ongoing development of Australian health policy and practice.

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The George Institute for Global Health

The George Institute for Global Health conducts clinical, population and health system research aimed at changing health practice and policy worldwide. Established in Australia and affiliated with UNSW Sydney, it also has offices in China, India and the UK, and is affiliated with the University of Oxford.

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