National E-Health Strategy

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SECTION 1: GENERAL QUESTIONS

What is E-Health?

"E-health" is defined by the World Health Organisation as 'the combined use of electronic communication and information technology in the health sector.' It refers to the health care components delivered, enabled or supported through the use of information and communications technology. It may involve clinical communications between healthcare providers such as online referrals, electronic prescribing and sharing of electronic health records. It can also provide access to information databases, knowledge resources and decision support tools to guide service delivery.

How can E-Health make a difference to consumers?

Consumers can receive safer, better coordinated and more accessible care as a result of the improved accuracy, completeness and accessibility of personal health information and the ability to gain remote access to care delivery services. They can also be better supported to stay healthy through access to reliable health information sources, tailored care plans and automated care provider monitoring of personal health status.

How can E-Health make a difference to care providers?

Care providers can make more informed decisions at the point of care as a result of better access to accurate and complete consumer health information, the support of relevant decision support tools and access to an improved evidence base for treatment decisions. They can deliver care more efficiently and be able to more easily share information and coordinate care delivery with other providers.

How can E-Health make a difference to healthcare managers?

Healthcare Managers can access more accurate, comprehensive and timely data for the purpose of more effectively monitoring Australian health outcomes, prioritising clinical and administrative investment decisions, undertaking targeted research programs, and driving policy directions.

SECTION 2: STRATEGY QUESTIONS

What is the National E-Health Strategy?

The National E-Health Strategy provides a framework and plan for national coordination and collaboration to further develop E-Health in Australia. The Strategy is aimed at delivering a safer, better connected and more sustainable healthcare system over the next decade.

The Strategy adopts a staged approach to developing E-Health capabilities to:

- leverage what currently exists in the Australian E-Health landscape;
- manage the underlying variation in capacity across the health sector and States and Territories; and
- allow scope for change as lessons are learned and technology is developed further.

Why was the Strategy developed?

Recognising the importance of E-Health in supporting health reform, Australian Health Ministers commissioned the development of an E-Health strategy for Australia..

The health information landscape is currently characterised by discrete islands of information, many of which are paper based. This has created significant barriers to the effective sharing of information between health care participants to support accessible, safe, quality healthcare, an issue compounded by Australia's multiple health service boundaries and geographic distances. It also presents real challenges when trying to understand and report what is really happening in the Australian healthcare system to support population health surveillance and guide policy, service planning, innovation and clinician and operational decision making.

Whilst governments and the private sector are already investing in various E-Health initiatives, without some form of national coordination there is a real risk of duplication or the creation of new solutions that cannot be integrated or scaled across the continuum of care. The Strategy provides guidance on how we can build on these existing initiatives to progressively deliver priority E-Health solutions.

Who was consulted?

A series of national consultations were conducted which included Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, general practitioners, medical specialists, nursing and allied health, pathology, radiology and pharmacy sectors, health information specialists, health service managers, researchers, academics and consumers. An electronic submission process was also used to facilitate wider community input. The input of a diverse group of stakeholders has been critical to informing the strategy and its priorities for E-Health in Australia over the next decade.

How will the Strategy be implemented?

The response to the Strategy will be coordinated through the Australian Health Ministers Conference (AHMC). The AHMC will be supported by its advisory committees, in particular the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC) and the National E-Health and Information Principal Committee (NEHIPC).

Specific decisions about the next steps will occur in consultation with the National E-Health Transition Authority (NEHTA) and other key groups.

To ensure the best result there will be a need for ongoing communication and consultation with the Australian public, health sector and relevant others about a work plan to deliver on future decisions.

When will the Strategy commence?

The Strategy recognises that Australia's E-Health journey has already started through work on key E-Health foundations and various initiatives. The next stage of the national E-Health work program will be determined by governments in consultation with key stakeholders during 2009.

How much will the Strategy cost to implement? Who will fund it?

Until specific implementation decisions are made, which will need to take account of existing jurisdictional commitments, priorities and plans in E-Health, it is not possible to estimate a cost or to identify potential funding sources.

SECTION 3: RELATED QUESTIONS

What happens to the E-Health projects currently underway in jurisdictions?

The Strategy reinforces the existing collaboration of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments on the core foundations of a national E-Health system, and identifies priority areas where this can be progressively extended to support health reform in Australia. It also provides sufficient flexibility for individual States and Territories, and the public and private health sectors, to determine how they go about E-Health implementation within a common framework and set of priorities to maximise benefits and efficiencies.

There will be a need to consider existing work before making specific decisions regarding next steps. Jurisdictional E-Health programs should result in the establishment of State and Territory E-Health platforms that provide a basis for integration into and information sharing with national E-Health infrastructure. Priority work will focus on replicating successful initiatives in a planned and coordinated way.

What will happen to NEHTA?

NEHTA's mandate is unchanged, that is, to develop basic infrastructure such as national standards, authentication, terminologies, unique identification etc that underpin and are integral to a national E-Health system. The need for this foundation work remains, and without it, a national system would not be possible. The Council of Australian Governments agreed in November 2008 to provide $218 million to NEHTA to enable it to continue its existing work program for the period July 2009 – June 2012.

Decisions about any changes to NEHTA's future governance or capacity in response to the National E-Health Strategy will be made by governments in consultation with the NEHTA board.

Why is greater uniformity in privacy arrangements important for E-Health in Australia?

Health information privacy in Australia is currently regulated by a mix of inconsistent and overlapping Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation and administrative arrangements. The lack of a national health information privacy framework is recognised as a constraint on development and implementation of national E-Health initiatives. A higher level of consistency in privacy arrangements across Australia will provide more clarity and greater certainty for both consumers and providers of healthcare within an E-Health environment.

Why is the Strategy recommending an incremental and distributed approach to the development of Individual Electronic Health Records (IEHRs)?

The Strategy adopts a pragmatic approach to IEHRs that:

- Focuses initial effort on enabling the flow of quality and relevant health information across the Australian care provider network;
- Supports more effective management of IEHR implementation costs and risks;
- Reflects the complexity and fragmentation of the Australian health system and the relatively early stages of IEHR development in Australia; and
- Supports the timely delivery of IEHR capability in those parts of the health sector that are ready to move more quickly.

Adopting an incremental and distributed approach to IEHRs accommodates capacity building requirements and allows the delivery of tangible benefits as E-Health capabilities are developed along the journey.

What sort of incentives will be offered to healthcare providers to use E-Health solutions?

Incentives that may be offered to the health sector for future E-Health initiatives will be considered as part of specific implementation decisions.

What role will information technology vendors have in the implementation of the Strategy?

Market demand will encourage vendors to develop scalable, standards compliant E-Health solutions in national priority areas. Some vendors are already working with care providers to design ways to improve and extend existing E-Health solutions.

Where can I get further information?

You may contact your local Health Department or check its website for further information about the National E-Health Strategy and opportunities to be involved in E-Health activities.

Further information about the NEHTA's work program can be found at:
http://www.nehta.gov.au