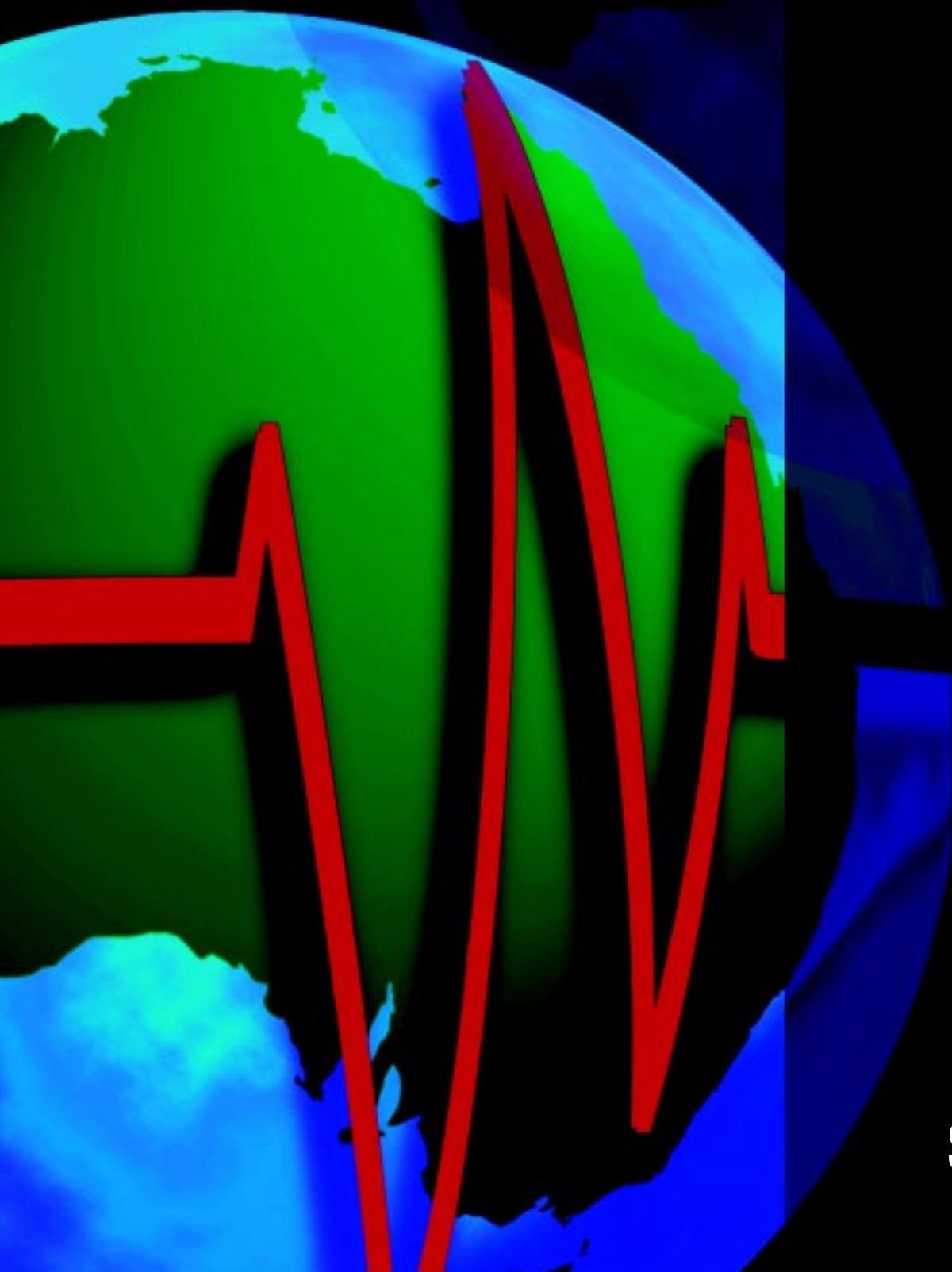# Health Online

A Health Information Action Plan for Australia

National Health
Information Management
Advisory Council

November 1999

Summary

Health Online:
A Health Information Action Plan for Australia

Summary

Contents

A direction for the future

Australians are rapidly changing the ways in which they go about their daily lives and do business by taking advantage of new information and communications technologies.

The better use of such technologies can also change the ways in which health care is managed and delivered, for the benefit of all Australians.

Already, there is much activity underway in every state and territory, and across the public and private sectors, which is aimed at using technology to build a better health care system. Until now, however, much of the activity has been done in isolation of a strategic, national plan.

## What is Health Online: A Health Information Action Plan for Australia?

Health Online:A Health Information Action Plan for Australia has been developed in response to the need for a national plan of action for information management in the health sector.

It sets out both a framework for future work and project details that are already underway or are planned for sometime in the next five years. It promotes new ways of delivering health services that benefit consumers, by harnessing the enormous potential of new technologies. Most importantly, it is a living document, that will be updated and monitored over time under the direction of the National Health Information Management Advisory Council.

It is important to understand that much of the activity outlined in the plan will not happen overnight. However, unless the direction is set and the framework established, the potential benefits will not be realised.

Fundamental to all of this activity is the need to ensure that opportunities and processes are in place to enable adequate consultation with consumers and providers to take place.

The release of *Health Online* to raise public discussion is an important first step in this consultation process — only by such processes will the direction for the future use of information technology in the health sector be finally set.
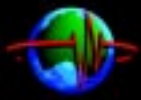
How has Health Online been developed?

Health Online has been developed over the past twelve months. During this period of time, much discussion over the final shape and content of *Health Online* has taken place with Commonwealth, state and territory governments and other key stakeholders.

The two main issues that emerged from these discussions are the need for a practical plan and the need to ensure that the public's interests are protected along the way.

The current version of the plan has subsequently been developed by the National Health Information Management Advisory Council, comprising representatives from the public and private sectors and consumers. *Health Online* has been subsequently endorsed by Australian Health Ministers.

Mission:

"To improve the delivery of health care and achieve better quality of care and health outcomes through effective and innovative use of health information"

How will consumers' privacy be protected?

Critical to the success of all the activities contained in *Health Online* is the extent to which health consumers are confident that the privacy of their personal health information is assured.

Health Online has been developed in an environment where the privacy of individuals is regarded as integral to all activities and where consumers can have trust that their personal information is valued, kept secure and used wisely.

Also, the Commonwealth is in the process of developing the *Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Bill 1999* concerning the protection of personal information in the private sector. This will mean that, for the first time, national baseline legislation will cover the collection, transfer and use of personal information, including health information, in the private sector.

Additional legislative approaches will need to be considered in the future as new technologies are used to communicate personal health information across health and community settings. Details of proposals in this area are covered in *Health Online*.

Ongoing consultation with health consumers will be an important part of the developmental phases of the activities contained within the plan, as will providing consumers with choices concerning their participation.

What are the benefits for the health sector?

The new and innovative ways to manage information proposed in the plan are aimed at building a better health system that will benefit both those who access it and those who work in it — that is health consumers, health providers and policy makers and managers.

Health consumers

As in other areas of life, consumers of health services want greater access to information, choice and the chance to exercise more control over their own health and well-being (as well as that of others they may act on behalf of — such as children). At the simplest level, health consumers require access to information held about themselves. They want to know about the state of their own health, and are interested in what treatments or interventions work and about any side effects. Having greater access to information will empower and enable people to interact as informed consumers and make sensible choices within the health system.

Health consumers are already familiar with the convenience of online transactions in other walks of life — such as electronic banking and bill paying. Access to fast and convenient claims processing will be similarly expected of Medicare claims and prescribing services in the future. Much is made in the media of remote health service delivery (telehealth) and for many Australians living in rural and regional areas, this will become an important means of accessing high-quality, real-time interactive health advice and assistance.

It is acknowledged that not all health consumers will find it easy to adapt to the next generation of information services. These activities, however, are not designed to replace, but complement traditional ways of providing care.

Health providers

Health providers, such as general practitioners, specialists, community nursing and pharmacists, are living in a world of ever expanding advances in new therapies (eg in the form of new procedures and the introduction of new drugs), greater emphasis on evidence-based health care, higher levels of consumer expectations, and better informed and more empowered consumers. Health providers use a number of different sources of information, to ensure that they can offer services in the best interests of consumers.

Access to information from these sources is already available but it is often frustratingly delayed, not accessible when needed or, at times, inaccurate because of reliance on recall or on patient self-reporting. New ways of providing access to these sources of information (including methods such as electronic links to journals or professional 'chat groups') are part of the information challenge in health.

New sources of information are already being sought by health providers, such as built-in alerts and prompts to assist in treating, prescribing, and ongoing monitoring. These are all part of a growing range of decision-support services.

Policy makers and managers

The growing need to be able to assess the quality and outcomes of health initiatives and the greater emphasis on evidence-based health care has meant that there are growing demands to collect, collate and analyse an ever-increasing volume of health data.

Policy makers and managers are required to balance increasing demands for health services and products within constrained budgets. Australia's aging population and the increasing availability of new services and products — driven by research and technology — are all adding substantially to the need for policy makers and planners to be able to make effective decisions. At a broader level of government accountability, there is also pressure to demonstrate that large outlays of public funds are producing the hoped for outcomes and in as cost-effective manner as possible.

While governments are mainly concerned with issues of individual and public health, the health sector can also be viewed in the context of industry policy. Australia's reputation for excellence in health training and service delivery, and its growing interest in the use of health information — including its pioneering work in telehealth services — means that the potential exists to increasingly export health services. Therefore, considerable opportunities exist for Australian health providers and health information industries in the global market place (especially in this region).

What plans for action are contained in Health Online?

The main focus of *Health Online* is the action plans it contains. These plans are designed to meet the overall mission, and are designed to deliver better health information and services. They are plans for activities that are nationally significant, and are complemented by many more projects that are under way in the states and territories. *Health Online* also attempts to capture some sense of the future work that needs to be undertaken by referring to some projects in name only — as a way of telegraphing 'future work' plans.

While the projects outlined in the plan are largely government initiatives, it is anticipated that private sector activities will be included in the longer term.
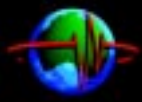
Specific areas of work form the basis of the sections of *Health Online.* They are:

Achieving national collaboration

- this section of *Health Online* outlines projects that concern establishing national coordination and partnership arrangements. These projects are designed to bring a nationally coordinated approach to developing health information services Australia-wide.

Laying sound foundations

- a number of 'building blocks' are necessary to underpin the framework in which projects are advanced. These are issues that particularly require national agreement and cooperation. With this agreement, many individual projects can proceed within jurisdictions that will prove to be compatible on a national basis. Key building block issues are privacy protection and other legal/security issues, standards, infrastructure issues, change management and training, and research and development.

Empowering consumers and communities for better health

- health consumers are seeking more information, more choice and a greater say in their own health and well-being. Projects that form part of this section of *Health Online* recognise this and aim to tailor information and services to meet consumer expectations.

Supporting clinical care

- a number of projects that are designed to support clinical care are described in this section. They cover the sharing of information for coordinated care, decision-support services and better access to current practice information.

Using information to build a more efficient and effective health care system

- this section covers two critical areas of interest. The first concerns the efficiencies that can be achieved through the use of electronic data transfer — in areas like hospital supply chain activity, Medicare claims and electronic prescribing. The second area concerns projects that are designed to deliver better clinical and administrative data for research, policy and planning purposes. Ultimately, projects in this area are designed to inform government about health needs and about how the various initiatives are performing so that health resources can be applied to maximum effect.

Export of Australian 'online' health services

- health services in Australia are well regarded overseas. There are already exports of Australian health services of various kinds, particularly in Australia's region of the world. There is considerable scope to develop an export market for a range of health information, information industry and direct services delivered remotely. Some of this industry development work is speculative nevertheless this section describes action that can be taken that is designed to provide impetus for its growth.
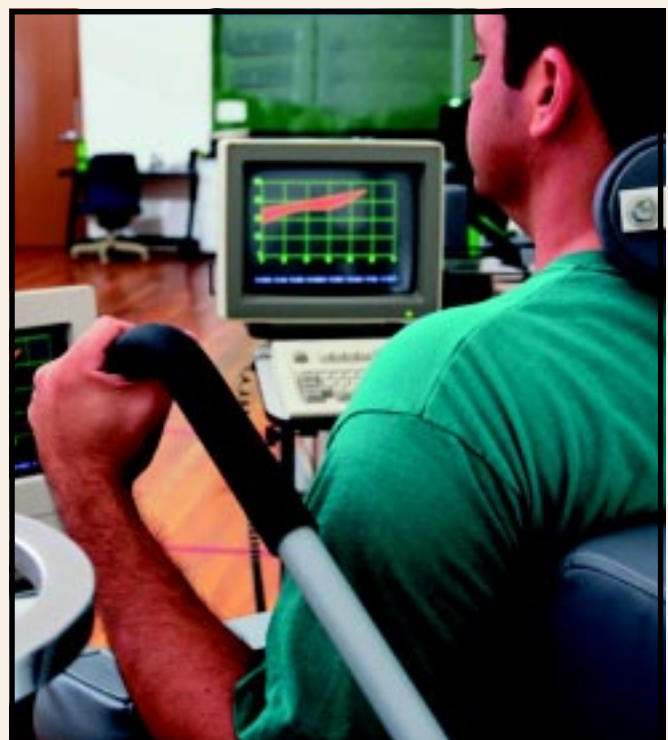
What will the Australian health care system look like in the future?

So what might the Australian health care system look like in the future? If firm foundations are laid and if the projects mapped out in *Health Online* are implemented, then Australia's future health care system could look like the following:

- consumers and providers, wherever they are located (in the city or the country), will have on-line access to clinical records, clinical advice, specialist referrals, diagnostic tests and results, and other telehealth services;

- consumers will have the opportunity to provide general practitioners, specialists, hospitals (public and private) and other health providers with access to information on their clinical histories held in comprehensive lifetime electronic health records (to which consumers themselves would also have access), with appropriate regard to security, privacy and the appropriate use and disclosure of data;

- there will be a seamless delivery of care for the consumer with the right information being available at the time and place where care is delivered — and with greater integration and exchange between health and community sectors;

- relevant information from medical records will be integrated with clinical decision-support systems;

- consumers and providers will have ready, electronic access to information to support informed choices among potential treatments and so provide better quality health service at the time and point of delivery;

- consumers, providers and managers will have access to high quality data for performance information development for benchmarking and quality improvement purposes;

- all providers will be linked with the key funders of the system (such as private health insurance funds and the Health Insurance Commission) to enable online, real-time transactions, including forwarding referral information and pharmaceutical prescriptions;

- data will be gathered as a by-product of operational systems to support research into improved promotion, prevention and treatment, and to provide a foundation for public health initiatives generally, while at the same time maintaining privacy and confidentiality; and

- consumers, providers, health care organisations and governments will have access to data that enable measurement of quality of care and health outcomes to inform treatment choices and policy development.

Find out more about Health Online:
A Health Information Action Plan for Australia
by looking at the online versions of the full strategy document
and the summary at

www.health.gov.au/healthonline

For further information please contact
the NHIMAC Secretariat,
Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care,
MDP 12, GPO Box 9848, Canberra ACT 2601.
Fax: (02) 6289 4083
Email: NHIMAC.Secretariat@health.gov.au

Have your say

Your comments on *Health Online* are welcome -
please forward your ideas to the NHIMAC Secretariat using the above email or postal
address.