



Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) is a continuous, national survey of general practice activity in Australia in which ever changing random samples of about 1000 GPs per year take part. It commenced in 1998.

SNOMED CT: is it valid for use by Australian GPs?

What is SNOMED CT and what does it mean for GPs in Australia?

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In 2006 the Australian Government purchased a licence for the free use of the Systematized Nomenclature of Medicine – Clinical Terms (SNOMED CT) reference terminology within Australia, as part of a move to improve the standard of information flows in Australian health care.¹

The National e-Health Transition Authority – a not-for-profit company funded by the Australian state, territory and federal governments – is the group coordinating this effort and is responsible for distributing SNOMED CT in Australia.² SNOMED CT has been judged the best clinical terminology available to facilitate electronic communication and information transfer.

What is SNOMED CT?

Simply put, SNOMED CT is a large database of medical concepts. These concepts cover all domains of medicine including clinical findings, observable entities, procedures, substances, pharmaceutical products, organisms and body structures, to name a few. There are over 350 000 concepts in SNOMED CT. Each concept is linked to one or more descriptions which are regarded as 'synonymous' with the concept. Concepts are arranged in hierarchies to help identify the relationships between concepts.³

What are the advantages of SNOMED CT?

As gatekeepers to the health system, general practitioners have an important role in communicating with other health providers such as hospitals, specialists and allied health professionals. SNOMED CT should assist in this process. Different clinicians describe the same or similar medical concepts in different ways. Consider the terms 'type 1 diabetes', 'insulin dependent diabetes' and 'juvenile onset diabetes'. Some clinicians will regard these terms as synonymous; others will see subtle differences between them. Implementing a clinical terminology into an electronic patient record allows these terms to be presented in a standardised way so that clinical information sent electronically by a clinician can be interpreted by other clinicians.

Is SNOMED CT valid for Australian general practice?

If SNOMED CT is to be implemented in Australian electronic medical records, we must ensure that it includes all the terms used by Australian GPs in their day to day practice.

At this point there is no timeline for the implementation of SNOMED CT into general practice electronic medical records. Before SNOMED CT

is implemented, its content will need to be converted to Australian spelling, and medical terms used exclusively in Australia will need to be added to form an Australian extension. An Australian general practice subset containing the most commonly used terms used by Australian GPs will need to be developed along with search mechanisms to facilitate easy data entry. The Family Medicine Research Centre at the University of Sydney is conducting research to make sure that the needs of Australian GPs are met during the development and implementation of SNOMED CT in Australia. The centre will also be involved in mapping SNOMED CT to the International Classification of Primary Care, version 2 (ICPC-2), which is the Australian standard for reporting data collected in general practice.

Work is progressing in all of these areas, and NEHTA has developed priorities for the implementation process. While SNOMED CT may not be used actively in general practice for some time, GPs should be aware of its existence and potential uses. Certainly, its adoption in general practice will have implications for national data collection programs such as BEACH. ♦

1. National E-Health Transition Authority. About NEHTA. Available at: www.nehta.gov.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1&Itemid=425 [Accessed 28 September 2007].
2. National E-Health Transition Authority. Key foundation of electronic health communication in place, 2006. Available at: www.nehta.gov.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=136&Itemid=144 [Accessed 28 September 2007].
3. College of American Pathologists. SNOMED clinical terms user guide (January 2007 release), 2007. Available at: www.ihtsdo.org/our-standards/technical-documents [Accessed 28 September 2007].