



General Practice e-health

Thinking local, acting nationally to improve health care for all

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1.0 AIM

This position statement outlines the RACGP's vision for e-health for the profession and for the organisation¹.

2.0 BACKGROUND

This position statement builds on the work of the General Practice Computing Group and a range of e-health initiatives in Australia and overseas. The General Practice Computing Group has articulated a strategic vision for general practice e-health, identifying six key outcomes; that general practitioners are supported to:

- “ . . . establish and maintain electronic databases containing information to improve patient care:
- . . . electronically exchange data and other relevant information effectively and efficiently across the health sector.
- . . . use and have access to relevant and up to date diagnostic and treatment information on their computers.
- . . . effectively use computer technology in the administration of their practices.
- . . . collect and use data to inform practice and population health research.
- . . . [with] other health professionals use compatible electronic systems.”²

It is recognised that “fragmented and inaccessible clinical information adversely affects both the cost and quality of health care as well as compromising patient safety³.” E-health is essential for high quality, safe health care.

2.1 RACGP: role and function

For fifty years the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) has been building and supporting the capacity of general practitioners to provide high quality care through existing and new services.

The RACGP mission is ‘to improve the health and well being of individuals and communities across Australia by supporting our current and future members in their pursuit of clinical excellence and ensuring high quality clinical practice, education and research for Australian General Practice⁴.’

The RACGP is Australia's largest medical college with approximately 17,000 members and over 23,000 general practitioners involved in the RACGP Quality Assurance and Continuing Professional Development Program.

The RACGP has a significant e-health footprint; a web site that is among the most used health sites in Australia, a sophisticated online learning system – *gplearning* – online examination preparation resources, online Australian Family Physician, MyGP and MyGeneralPracticeTeam, online QA&CPD, an e-library including pod casts, weekly messaging using Friday Fax and a range of guidelines. Most of the College committees work from a distance using e-resources and tools.

1 This position statement will be supported by action plans, work plans and subsidiary policy statements [as required] that provide further explanation of the RACGP position. /

2 http://www.gpcg.org.au/images/stories/pdfs/publications/docs/workprogram2001_2004.pdf

3 Anderson,(2006) Internat J Internal Medicine informatics

4 <http://www.racgp.org.au/council/strategicprinciples>

The RACGP e-red book will be the first truly interactive decision support tool designed for Australian primary care. The development of a guideline editor for the e-red book will allow the RACGP to update the tool regularly.

The RACGP has a unique opportunity to use its position as the trusted representative of the profession to promote e-health as an enabler that supports the delivery of better patient outcomes, more efficient practice and patient management, improved, timely communication, gathering and organizing information and using information wisely to support safe and high quality care.

In relation to e-health, the RACGP envisions general practitioners and practice teams will:

- Share information to improve the safety and quality of care delivered at the time of care delivery and to improve patient health outcomes through clinical decision support and enhanced communication;
- Improve individual patient care and practice processes through continuous improvement of care;
- Enhance communication with, and education of, patient and their carers, strengthening participation in decision making;
- Using information management systems to identify personal training needs and to deliver training, including fellowship training and ongoing professional development; and
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The RACGP uses, and will continue to use, its existing data and knowledge to advocate for the improvement of health care for all Australians.

2.2 What is e-health

For the purpose of this paper e-health "is an emerging field of medical informatics, referring to the organisation and delivery of health services and information using the internet and related technologies. In a broader sense, the term characterizes not only technical development but also a new way of working, an attitude and a commitment for networked global thinking, to improve health care locally, regionally and worldwide by using information and communication technology"⁵.

E-health is more than an enabler of health care; it is pivotal to a safe and high quality health care system through improved information management. E-health improves aspects of health care by:

- Supporting the delivery of health care that is targeted through informed decision making based on evidence and patient-specific data.
- Facilitating shared care across sectors and locations.
- Aiding evidence-based practice and error reduction.
- Improving diagnostic accuracy and treatment appropriateness.
- Improving access to effective health care by reducing barriers created by location, disability or other factors.

⁵ Pagliari C, Sloan D, Gregor P et al. What is eHealth?: a scoping exercise to map the field. J Med Internet Res. 2005 Mar 31;7(1):e9

- Facilitating patient self care and health decision making
- Improving cost efficiency by streamlining processes, reducing waste⁶.
- Facilitating research and informing national policy.

2.3 General Practice and e-health drivers

National Environment: General practitioner uptake of information technology has been a significant success story in Australian health care. In the mid 1990's 15% of GPs used computers for clinical purposes. This has risen to 90% in 2006⁷ Rapid uptake has been fueled by:

- Early engagement of the leading general practice thinkers in the General Practice Computing Group providing a strategic and united voice of GPs at national level.
- Ready availability of clinical software systems that met the basic requirements for an efficient general practice.
- National government initiatives, eg Broadband for Health, HealthConnect, National e-Health Transition Authority (NeHTA), the various practice incentive payments for information technology have encouraged usage; Australian General Practice Networks' Regional Health Information Management Officers providing services to practices and divisions
- Widespread community acceptance of computer and internet technology and the rise of B2B transactions.
- Increased focus on community based care resulting in greater complexity and chronicity of presentations in general practice. GPs require effective information management strategies to manage longitudinal complex care presentations.
- The concurrent rise in team based approaches to general practice care that necessitates effective information management [continuity of information] within and outside the practice.

The interest in information management and capacity within the general practice environment will continue to increase in coming years, reinforcing existing drivers and creating new ones.

2.4 Factors Limiting General Practice ehealth uptake

While there are robust drivers for general practice e-health, there are significant barriers for general practitioners and their practice teams, including

- Lack of agreed national standards to drive a national system (interoperability)
- Piecemeal incentives for enhancement of information technology and information management in general practice.

⁶ Adapted from www.openclinical.org/e-health

⁷ McInnes, K, Saltman, D and Kidd, M (2006) General practitioners' use of computers for prescribing and electronic health records: results from a national survey, in MJA 185(2) 88-91

- Limited investment in infra- and info-structure in general practice and systems to support implementation and change management.
- Limited focus on practice systems required to maximize existing information management and technology and to improve functionality.
- General practitioners have limited time to consider, review and implement e-health systems at the practice level, or to undertake training.
- Limited and variable regional support for general practice information management systems.

This has resulted in:

- Limited and patchy adoption of information management systems at the practice
- Poor quality information, including lack of consistency of data entry, duplication and out of date information
- Limited resources for deployed to improve information systems
- Challenges in changing work practices and processes of general practitioners and staff

In looking to the future all e-health programs need to consider how to address these significant barriers.

2.5 What this means for the General Practice

The general practitioners trusted position in the health care community will be enhanced by a systematic focus on information management strategies within an e-health framework.

The RACGP has established a trusted position as representative of the profession through its wise management of the General Practice Computing Group and the development of useful resources. This position will be further enhanced by the effective integration of its data and information management, including:

- Integration of information management and e-health approaches across business units.
- Respectful and considered review of the use of information for research and quality improvement processes that enhances care for Australians at the individual and population health level.

3.0 CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES

3.1 Principles Informing the RACGP e-health policy

The principles that guide our approach to ehealth are:

Active general practitioner and **consumer engagement** in health care: For effective engagement, consumers require tools, resources and supports for decision making that reflect the different skills, understanding and background of patients.

e-health activity must **reflect the wider doctor patient relationship**; the core of general practice is the respectful partnering of general practitioners and patients to identify optimal care that meets the needs of the patient. Consequently general practitioners require up to date, relevant information and support tools that ensure good decision making. Information transferred in an ehealth system must be secure.

Information gathered in the consultation should **support better health outcomes** for the individual and be available for population health improvement, leading to a reduction in inequalities, improving quality, expanding knowledge and assisting researchers to better design systems of care.

General practitioners **share the digital dividend** of providing improved care. There is an alignment of incentives that encourage whole patient care, improved outcomes.

Patient information will be handled respectfully, **stored and shared securely**. Personal health information is only shared with consent. There are systems in place to monitor security and confidentiality within practices and across health sectors and systems.

e-health leadership is encouraged and required at the practice, regional and national level.⁸

3.2 General practice and e-health

The RACGP sees e-health as pivotal to the continuation of improvement in health care for all Australians:
Specifically:

Data, Information and Benefit: General practice data on patients provides the basis for episodic, continuing and population health care. The effective, retrievable information contained in medical records is essential for a safe and efficient health care system. The development of a Shared e-Health Record (SeHR) provides opportunities for general practice to reaffirm its centrality to health care in Australia.

The RACGP supports initiatives that improve patient data for quality, safety, research and business improvement.

The RACGP will develop systems and approaches that ensure general practitioners value and use data contained in their clinical systems for research, quality and business improvement seamlessly.

The RACGP will use information within its system to build ongoing support for general practice.

The RACGP will actively seek agreement of general practitioners in any initiative that involves use of practice information.

⁸ Adapted from Health Initiative Blueprint: building consensus for common action www.ehealthinitiative.org/blueprint

To be effective the RACGP will continue to streamline its processes and functions across business units.

Education and Training: e-health is central to the development of a safe, fair, accessible and equitable education and professional development system for general practitioners. Through the internet, general practitioners can access tools for assessing training needs and delivering training to doctors throughout Australia and internationally, can provide innovative systems for learning and up-skilling.

The RACGP supports web based education initiatives, like *gplearning*, that increase access to high quality knowledge and information.

The RACGP supports web based education tools that train and develop Australia's next generation of general practitioners.

The RACGP supports web based tools that continuously improve professional practice.

Electronic Communication: An essential pre-requisite for a functional e-health system is the electronic exchange of information across the health sector. General practitioners require systems that allow secure messaging and assured security.

The RACGP acknowledges the work of NeHTA in establishing standards that will build consistent communication, but acknowledges that implementation of standards remains a challenge.

The RACGP supports and encourages a national standards based approach to e-communication.

The RACGP will enhance electronic communication with members and the profession. The RACGP will design tools, such as the online curriculum and assessment support tools that allow doctors throughout the world to access our resources equitably.

The RACGP will use MyGP, its web site and other e-resources to deliver effective two way communication with the profession

Decision support: It is essential that general practitioners and teams have access to relevant, evidence-based and up to date guidelines, diagnostic and treatment data and aides at the point of care, decision support tools and accurate and accessible medical records within their computer systems. Information must be presented in a way that allows GPs to easily identify key messages. Concurrently

consumers require access to high quality clinical and other information that assists in clinical decision making.

The RACGP supports the identification, development, utilisation and incentivising of high quality decision support tools for Australian general practice.

The RACGP will provide members with print, online and electronic decision supports tools where feasible. The RACGP e-red book will be the first truly interactive decision support tool designed for Australian primary care. The development of a guideline editor for the e-red book will allow the RACGP to update the tool regularly.

The RACGP supports the design and development of e-tools that allow GPs to confidently provide care for patients.

The RACGP will use its own information consistently to support high quality decision making

Business management and business improvement: The growth of business-to-business applications (B2B) in the wider community provides opportunities for general practitioners to efficiently manage the business of general practice. It is essential that reporting, billing and claiming processes are integrated into general practice software systems and that those systems allow benchmarking of performance against agreed standards and/or other general practices.

The RACGP supports approaches that reduce burden, improve patient services and are integrated.

The RACGP will continue to develop e-business solutions that benefit members and the operation of the organisation

Whole of Sector Approach: The RACGP advocates and supports a whole-of-system approach to e-health. It is essential that e-health systems in the acute, continuing and primary care sectors are standards based and compatible (terminology, coding, and interoperability) and support collaboration.

It is essential that the RACGP commits to a whole of profession approach to avoid fragmentation and that it works collaboratively with a wide array of key agencies.

The RACGP will use standards based solutions where-ever possible

4.0 CONCLUSION

An e-health environment is essential for the future of Australia. E-health is more than an enabler: it is a tool for quality improvement, for business improvement, to support decision making and patient care outcomes, for education and training and consumer engagement.

In summary, the RACGP

- Supports a collaborative approach involving GP, patient and practice staff

- Supports secure electronic sharing of information

- Supports a standards-based approach

- Supports an electronic patient record that conforms to coding, classification standards across Australia and the world

- Supports the use of electronic solutions for positive health outcomes

- Supports the streamlining of all business transactions in an effort to remove/alleviate red tape and free up GPs and practice staff to assist the patient

- Supports a secure approach to all electronic communication involving patient information

- Upholds the privacy of patients and the profession