

4 November 2009

Australian Primary Health Care Organisations:
Health care access, equity and wellness
A Network blueprint

About 240 leaders from all members of the Australian General Practice Network came together to discuss health reform in Sydney on 4 November in association with the AGPN National Forum.

A time for change

Network Chairs and CEOs agreed that significant change to the Australian health care system is long overdue. Australia's health care system should be refocused on stronger, more integrated primary health care built on general practice.

The development of Australian primary health care organisations (PHCOs) is a fundamental building block in a reformed system with primary health care (PHC) at its centre: they are a key way to integrate care and increase effectiveness. PHCOs can address health inequity, develop awareness and capacity around delivery of integrated PHC services within the community, overcome fragmentation in the system and drive quality and efficiency.

What will be different for patients and the community?

Australia is a prosperous country. Patients and the community deserve health care of the highest standard, yet we have areas of severe health disadvantage particularly in our Indigenous communities.

For patients and the community, PHCOs will ensure the delivery of:

- _ better **access** to front line health care through reinvigorated general practice networked with allied health, nursing and community services that are affordable and accessible
- _ better **systems** to support hard-working GPs and primary health care providers to focus on patients not red tape
- _ better **team work** resulting in truly linked up services
- _ better **patient satisfaction and health outcomes**

Participants endorsed the following principles and characteristics for PHCOs.

Principles

- _ General practice is the front line setting where most people go for their health care, with more than 100 million consultations each year: integration with general practice is critical to reform of comprehensive, continuing PHC
- _ General practice engagement and strong clinical-managerial partnerships are critical to leading more organised PHC in Australia. The General Practice Network is the only mechanism that universally engages general practice in Australia
- _ PHCOs should be built on what exists and what works. The Network is the logical platform to establish regional PHC organisations. They already have strong engagement with GPs and general practice. They also have the agility, coverage, credibility, capability and consistency of performance on which to base PHCOs
- _ PHCOs must help achieve current health reform objectives: maximising a focus on

prevention; addressing health inequity; providing 'joined up' services and assisting to ensure the most effective and efficient use of resources

_ An urgent and significant commitment by Federal, State and Territory governments to develop eHealth solutions, including electronic patient records able to be used consistently in general practice and other PHC settings, is essential to ensure the most effective joined up system.

Scope

The role of PHCOs should be to facilitate improvements in the health and wellbeing of local populations through planning, coordinating, funding, developing and potentially delivering comprehensive primary health care services integrated with general practice.

PHCOs should:

- _ Undertake population health and service planning
- _ Strengthen the effectiveness, efficiency and vitality of regional PHC services
- _ Ensure access to PHC services that meet community need, particularly where there are service gaps
- _ Contribute to regional leadership and innovation in health
- _ Promote cooperation, collaboration and communication with other regional organisations with an interest in PHC

Capabilities

To carry out these roles, PHCOs will need clear responsibilities, the authority for planning and funding/commissioning services to meet gaps in service provision and the skills and resources to carry this out. In addition, they will:

- _ Build upon the vital work already done by GPNs in supporting and engaging with general practice
- _ Network and engage with others involved in the local service delivery environment: primary health care providers and support services to primary health care professionals
- _ Have a skills-based board reflecting the diversity of clinicians and services forming comprehensive PHC including general practice as well as other skills desirable for good governance
- _ Have mechanisms to garner clinical, consumer, community and health stakeholder input to PHCO strategic direction and decisions about planning and provision of services
- _ Be accountable to the Government and the community for measurable outcomes, using a consistent national performance and improvement framework
- _ Promote research and evaluation, and the enhancement of an evidence based culture in PHC
- _ Play a major role in the education, training and distribution of Australia's future PHC workforce
- _ Provide leadership in ensuring quality patient care by focussing on data and information management, and on eHealth solutions including electronic patient records.

Size and numbers

Australia is a diverse country with unique characteristics: a large geographic spread, remote areas and population dispersion. The National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission's final report has recommended that PHCOs should have a population size of 250,000 to 500,000. Other criteria needed to determine PHCO size and number will include relationships

with other agencies, existing patient flows, natural topography, growth corridors, transportation and communities of interest. Further research is needed to determine the right size, number, and geographical boundaries of future PHCOs.

Regional PHCOs with branch offices or 'hub and spoke' arrangements will be ideal for many larger regions to ensure accessible service delivery, continuing engagement with and support for general practice and other primary health care professionals, community participation and partnerships with local agencies.

Partnerships

Partnerships are essential to integrated care and better joined up systems. General practice networks bridge the PHC agenda of government and the needs and interests of local primary health care providers and communities. By extending these partnerships, PHCOs will usher in a new era of PHC organisation and practice.

Leadership and Transition

Leading reform of regional PHC will require organisational and infrastructure development that takes time. Establishment of a PHCO network by June 2012 is realistic.

As they develop over time and build up competencies and capacities, PHCOs can progressively assume more responsibility.

A transition support fund is recommended to assist with the evolution of the Network to a new system of PHCOs. A new national primary health care agency is proposed to coincide with the introduction of PHCOs to support change, innovation and service improvement.

This communiqué reflects the initial consensus outcome of deliberations at the CEOs/Chairs meeting following an extensive consultation process. A final detailed blueprint and transition plan for PHCO establishment will be submitted to Government in late November 2009. This will also include proposals for ensuring that, in any change environment, the value-added services already provided by General Practice Networks are nurtured and continued, potentially by existing networks operating as service providers.

Ends