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Health benefits for the disadvantaged from eHealth records

Electronic health records supported by the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC) could significantly improve disadvantaged Australians' health, but not without significant investment in health care IT says Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) CEO Mr David Butt.

"The chronically ill, Indigenous and those facing economic hardship would benefit most from the continuity of an electronic health record. Patients with multiple illnesses and numerous medications would essentially take their complex medical history with them to all their medical providers. It would ensure more reliable shared health care information across the health system," he said.

AGPN has applauded the Commission's high priority on eHealth, but its submission has warned that without a nationally supported information technology and information management infrastructure electronic health records, and a number of other eHealth objectives, will be difficult to achieve.

Mr Butt said health IT had lagged behind other industries and implementation of eHealth innovation was 'patchy'.

"A national eHealth strategy, properly funded and supported by government, with appropriate investment in health IT, is needed to transition to the brave new world of electronic health records. Divisions of general practice have already made inroads into this area and general practice is the most computerised part of the health system."

Divisions of general practice are actively involved in developing and supporting innovative eHealth solutions for general practice.

"Developing Australia's eHealth system has long been an objective of AGPN and we will continue to lobby for it. Divisions of general practice around the country have contributed to the creation of a number of systems including ePrescribing, safe electronic health records and health provider registers," he said.

Health providers and the public would need to be supported to embrace the new technology and to learn how to use it effectively to see health advantages, he said.

"Privacy of records remains a key concern, for doctors and for the public, and there also needs to be nationally developed technical standards. However, all of this could be achieved in the next few years," he said.

A copy of the AGPN submission can be found at: www.agpn.com.au in the 'What's New' section.

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