



**Australian Government**

**Australian Institute of  
Health and Welfare**

*Better information and statistics  
for better health and wellbeing*

## **HEALTHCARE IDENTIFIERS BILL 2010**

**Inquiry by the Senate Community Affairs Committee**

**Submission by the**

**Australian Institute of Health and Welfare**

**March 2010**

# SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

## INQUIRY INTO HEALTHCARE IDENTIFIERS BILL 2010

### AIHW SUBMISSION

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission.

As Australia's national agency for health and welfare information, the AIHW has a statutory role to collect, produce and coordinate health and welfare related information and statistics.

AIHW is required under its legislation (*Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987*) to ensure the confidentiality of data. This includes the obligation to not publish data in ways that could potentially identify details about any individual or body, and associated punitive actions should the provisions of the Act be breached.

The Institute complies with this requirement through the application of strict policies and procedures for data storage, handling, analysis and reporting, in combination with an established organisational culture that is highly attuned to ensuring data confidentiality.

These arrangements provide sturdy protection for individuals' privacy while allowing data to be used to enhance understanding of Australia's health needs and policies to help improve overall health outcomes of the Australian population.

#### **AIHW Position**

AIHW is supportive of any proposal that has the potential to improve the quality of health related information while maintaining, or even enhancing, privacy.

In the AIHW's view:

- Identity management, which aims to enhance the quantity and quality of information about patients that is available to health care providers, may also be used to derive an important information source for research and statistical analysis. Arrangements for the development and use of such an information

source must ensure individual patient's information remains confidential to those with authorised access.

- A well-governed system for healthcare identifiers, such as that set out in the Bill, can enhance privacy protection by ensuring that only authorised persons have access to health information.

## **Benefits**

A consistent system of identifiers for healthcare providers and individuals who receive health care can allow health information to be created in a consistent fashion and used and transmitted securely.

This will in turn enhance:

- continuity and safety in patient care, by ensuring that authorised healthcare providers receive information about a patient's health condition and treatment; and
- efficiencies, by reducing the need to repeatedly gather or transcribe the same information about a patient.

Further, other countries' experiences have shown that data emerging from an e-health system (of which a system of health identifiers is a key element) provide a powerful source of information about health provision. In Australia too, statistical analyses of e-health data could greatly enhance understanding of how well Australia's health systems are functioning and give greater insight into patient outcomes.

## **Access to the identifier for research purposes**

Clause 24(1) of the Bill before Parliament provides for the disclosure of a healthcare identifier to an entity if "the purpose of the use or disclosure is to communicate or manage health information as part of the conduct of research that has been approved by a Human Ethics Research Committee". Whether this is sufficient to permit one research body which has received approval for access to the identifier to pass it on to a collaborating entity for the purposes of data linkage is uncertain. This is an issue for organisations such as the AIHW and universities which frequently undertake joint research work, for example on clinical registers.

## **Privacy protections**

In any health system, information about patients must be recorded and shared in the course of providing services and referring patients from one clinician to another.

The system of healthcare identifiers set out in the Bill – and the accompanying strong arrangements for controlling who may see or use any identifier and any information about an individual patient – will allow the recording and sharing of health information to be achieved in a more secure way than at present.

As noted, the AIHW, as a requirement of its functioning under the Act, takes considerable care in ensuring the confidentiality and integrity of its information for the production of its reports and advice about Australia's health system. The introduction of healthcare identifiers and the means to guarantee their integrity will, the Institute believes, assist it greatly in providing timelier and better quality information about the provision of health care in Australia.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

March 2010