



09/214

Mr Andrew McGowan
Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL
ASSOCIATION
ABN 37 008 426 793
T | 61 2 6270 5400
F | 61 2 6270 5499
E | info@ama.com.au
W | www.ama.com.au
42 Macquarie St Barton ACT 2600
PO Box 6090 Kingston ACT 2604

Dear Mr McGowan

Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

The AMA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee on the role and potential of the National Broadband Network (NBN) in achieving health outcomes.

The AMA believes that online consultations via the internet and other telecommunications modalities have an important place in the delivery of health care for patients who have geographical difficulties in accessing medical practitioner services where the medical practitioner considers an in person consultation is not clinically necessary. This type of consultation should not, however, replace care where the medical practitioner considers an in person consultation is necessary in order to provide the best care for the patient.

Similarly, as the technology develops, the internet is likely to support an even greater range of healthcare services that may be clinically appropriate for delivery via the internet, such as the sending of lesion images for review by a remote specialist, or the participation of a remote expert as a consultant during a live surgical procedure. These innovations will offer benefits to all patients in Australia, particularly to those who live in remote and regional locations.

High speed internet supports the delivery of quality healthcare in three ways:

- It facilitates the rapid transfer of large volume files, high resolution images and clear video streaming necessary to ensure that medical practitioners have access to the best available information on which to base their clinical decision making;
- It minimizes slow download times, thereby both enabling medical practitioners to make time-critical treatment decisions, and preventing busy medical practitioners wasting time waiting for data to arrive electronically;
- Patients living in remote and regional locations, or those who are too infirm to travel to their general practitioner or specialist have greater access to medical care and/or the most clinically appropriate medical practitioner regardless of his or her physical location.

The AMA notes the Government's policy document 'Connecting health services with the future' that provides \$392.3 million to support online consultations. High speed internet will facilitate the full potential of online consultations now and lay down the infrastructure to incorporate innovations in online healthcare in the future.

The Government has promised that its proposed NBN will deliver speeds of 100 megabits per second to 93 per cent of premises, and that other communities will be served by next generation wireless and satellite technologies providing 20 times higher data rates than they currently experience. While the AMA is not in a position to comment on whether these goals are achievable through the rollout of the Government's NBN program, we do consider that technological solutions that deliver widespread access to high speed internet have the potential to effect an important change in the way healthcare can be delivered to the Australian people.

However, the AMA notes that this type of healthcare delivery would need to be adequately supported by the Medicare arrangements. Further, the delivery of healthcare using high speed internet is also contingent on the development and implementation of a range of eHealth tools. For example, an electronic medical record that links reliable and relevant medical information across healthcare settings would allow treating medical practitioners to access patient information quickly to inform their clinical decisions. Other eHealth tools like ePrescribing and discharge summaries could be made available across the healthcare sector via interoperable systems.

Any health care delivered with the assistance of internet technology will obviously need to have appropriate security measures in place to ensure the safe and secure movement of patient information, and be supported by mechanisms to protect access to the information, such as identity authentication processes.

While high speed internet that supports a range of eHealth tools can affect the way healthcare is delivered, it cannot be to the detriment of the doctor-patient relationship. Medical practitioners will still want to examine and treat patients in person to ensure patients receive the highest quality and safest care. Medical practitioners will only use internet based eHealth tools as an adjunct to normal medical practice where it offers patient convenience.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide more information to the Committee, particularly about the ways in which high speed internet access and evolving internet delivered health care tools make important changes to clinical practice.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Pesce
President

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