

Health Informatics Conference – Bulletin 1

Reported by Peter Drake.

The conference took place last week in Melbourne. It was characterised by mainly optimistic speculation concerning the formation of a new Australian Government – the potential outcomes and impact. This led to two primary questions from the conference:

Does eHealth have a future?

Yes – it does, but it looks cloudy !

This was the theme of several sessions, emerged in other sessions and was a constant undercurrent for many informal discussions. It appears to have been fuelled by the differences expressed between the two major parties and the potential for eHealth to “suffer” at the hands of one party compared to the other. My analysis of the discussions etc reveal the following:

- There is healthy cynicism about what pre-election promises / commitments may mean in the new political climate and it cannot be assumed that those statements will be upheld in any new order.
- Substantial investment has been made in eHealth – to the point that progress is inevitable, but may get side tracked based on political outcomes to the election. Will the National Broadband Network be valued more highly?
- Australia has reached beyond a policy, economic and infrastructure tipping point where many believe the support of industry is now a juggernaut – lumbering forward.
- What is missing is clearly identifiable political leadership. Who is the Minister who not only leads eHealth, but wants to be seen to be leading a technological transformation that can facilitate improved health outcomes? I cannot clearly point to that person – nor could other delegates at the conference. I could only conclude that the field is that complex, convoluted and, at best, only indirectly related to actual health improvements that it is a hard commodity to sell and, as such, is not politically attractive.

What came out of the conference ?

By their very nature, the majority of delegates were health informaticians or closely associated with that industry. As such, they approached the topic optimistically, even if a little philosophically. Some themes I observed were:

- The National Broadband Network may well get a guernsey as a change agent that suits the new political environment – possibly at the short term expense of some eHealth initiatives. This will only assist eHealth in the longer run – when the capacity of the network will be needed to meet what will be growing bandwidth needs.
- The rationalisation of the vendor market is starting to take place. The quiet “amalgamation” of Argus, DCA, HSD and Connecting Care into one body is a sign, to me, of the development of business groups that can cross the spectrum of eHealth technology needs – a possible one stop shop of the future. In addition, the

interoperability demonstration area showed all the signs of maturing systems that are rapidly heading to useful products for facilitating timely, effective communication.

DCA: <http://www.data.com.au/>

Argus: <http://www.argusconnect.com.au/>

HSD: <http://humanservicesdirectory.vic.gov.au/>

Connecting Care: <http://www.connectingcare.com/>

- The previous focus on hospitals is still high. At the conference primary care did not appear to be getting much of a profile. This, despite the fact that Australia, it was claimed, has one of the highest information technology investments per GP in the western world.
- The application of eHealth technology in chronic disease management was much discussed and vaunted as an important investment area.

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