

Digital Health Agency Submission: Remote and Isolated Populations

Prepared by:

CRANAplus (CRANAPLUS Incorporated)

Introduction

CRANaplus exists to ensure the delivery of safe, high quality primary healthcare to challenging and isolated areas of clinical practice. CRANaplus has provided over 30 years of education, support and professional services for the remote and isolated health workforce of Australia. We are the only member based, national organisation that has remote health as its sole focus, making us the remote health experts.

People in remote Australia, who are much more likely to be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, have higher morbidities and associated mortality, yet have limited access to services that most Australians would take for granted. Remote communities in Australia most commonly do not have a local hospital or a private general practitioner. Care is made available through access to Remote Area Nurses (RAN's) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners/Workers, supported by visiting Medical and Allied Health professionals, all of whom require advanced skills and knowledge.

The givens

Remotely located Australians suffer a much greater burden of disease than other Australians. The National Health Reform - progress and delivery report, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, Pg. 59), described the health burden in rural and remote areas as:

“People in rural areas of Australia have poorer health outcomes than their metropolitan counterparts. Life expectancy in regional areas is one or two years lower than in major cities, and for people in remote areas, life expectancy is up to seven years lower, due to higher rates of coronary artery disease and accidents. Poor health status also increases with remoteness.”

The context – Health professionals working in remote Australia work in some of the most geographically, professionally and socially isolating environments in the world. This requires them to be resourceful, have an advanced scope of practice, as well as public health knowledge and skills to work cross culturally.

Who are they? – Nurses, doctors, allied health professionals and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners/workers.

Where are they? – They work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, farming districts, on & offshore mining, tourism, Antarctica, on islands, in detention centres, justice health, aeromedical and small remote towns often with highly mobile populations.

Benefits of an effective efficient Digital system

The evidence supports that faster access to digital health records and seamless sharing of health information ultimately impacts positively on consumer health outcomes. These benefits include:

- Facilitation of records access for those moving across regions and jurisdictions
- Faster access to patient information across a range of health professional providers – multi disciplinary (dependent on client)
- Seamless communication mechanism across health service providers including hospitals and primary health care services; and
- Accurate and timely access to information and systems (including telehealth) enabling safe quality care for all remote and isolated health consumers.

Our Recommendations

Connectivity

The biggest issue for all remote health professionals working in remote and isolated locations is connectivity.

In 2016 we saw the commission of the first NBN Sky Muster satellite, designed to help increase and improve the availability of internet services across rural and remote areas up to 30 times faster than the old ISS network. Whilst the first users of the service experienced a dramatic improvement in connection speed, capacity was later stretched as more consumers connected to the service, with documented cases of outages, dropouts, latency and poor speed during high use hours.

The second NBN Sky Muster satellite is due for commission later this year, with the service to receive some capacity enhancement. The pending success of the NBN Sky Muster rollout and its ability to keep up with demand will play a pivotal role in ensuring the remote sector is ready for the new digital health records push.

It is our recommendation that the Australian Digital Health Agency closely aligns its strategies with the NBN Sky Muster rollout to ensure:

1. The existing and future capacity of the NBN Sky Muster Network can reliably service the remote health sector with a minimum connection speed of 12mbps download / 1 mbps upload.
2. The commissioned satellite(s) processing capacity can adequately cope with the growing number of users, and lobby for the commission of additional satellites as demand outstrips capacity; and
3. The NBN and the Australian Digital Health Agency jointly secure and maintain priority over fair use data limits when wholesaling data to local internet providers. It is critically important that all remote health services across the country receive priority when it comes to fair use data limits during peak hours; and
4. That health providers install adequate hardware (computers, wifi access) on site in remote locations.

Security

With global cybercrime on the increase nothing is more important than protecting all Australians health records. It is our recommendation that when implementing any digital health record database the following standards are always complied with:

1. The 2015 Australian Guidelines for the Protection of Health Information by HISA – Health Information Society Australia
2. The Australian Government’s Information Security Manual – Published by the Australian Signals Directorate (a part of the Australian Government Department of Defense)

CRANApplus strongly believes that with adequate connectivity, infrastructure and security, the remote health sector and its health consumers can greatly benefit from improvements to digital health records. CRANApplus would be very pleased to provide any further information to this submission from our well positioned perspective on the remote context.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'S. Dangaard', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Steven Dangaard
Acting CEO for CRANApplus Inc

Date 31 January 2017