

4 November 2021

Steven Issa
Chief Digital Officer
Australian Digital Health Agency

Dear Steven,

Next National Digital Health Strategy

Thank you for the invitation to make a written submission in response to the current consultation on the next National Digital Health Strategy.

Research Australia is the national peak body for Australian health and medical research (HMR), representing the entire pipeline from the laboratory to patient and the marketplace. Given our wholistic overview, we have a strong interest in digital health and how digital health information can be better utilised.

Seven Pillars still relevant

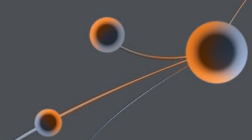
Reflecting on the current Digital Health Strategy, I think the existing seven pillars are still relevant. I suggest that when you undertake the next round of consultation on the new draft strategy it would be useful to accompany it with an update on the 2018 Framework for Action and an assessment of progress against the actions it contains under each of the Pillars. This would certainly assist us in understanding what has been achieved to date and what should be the priority actions under the next strategy.

Lessons from COVID-19

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been profound, and we are yet to learn many of the lessons, but I think some of the lessons for digital health are clear.

The first is that what constitutes digital health is perhaps broader than we previously imagined. I look, for example, at the role that the apps provided by the various state governments have provided in checking in in at venues, helping identify close contacts, manage vaccine bookings and messaging to people required to isolate. These have played a vital role in Australia's response to the pandemic. They used State and Territory government apps that were originally designed for more mundane purposes with little or nothing to do with health.

The second is what can be achieved when Commonwealth systems engage with the States and Territories. The digital vaccine certificates are a great example. It is a secure digital certificate created by the Commonwealth, using data on vaccines that have been administered by a range of different Commonwealth and State controlled vaccine providers. The certificate is available in a



person's Medicare app via their MyGov account and can be integrated into the State Government's Services app and used in one step to gain access to venues. It certainly would have been a lot more challenging two years ago to achieve this level of co-operation.

We strongly encourage the next Strategy to build on this level of cooperation and integration between Commonwealth and State Government services, infrastructure, and functions.

Telehealth has been a revelation during the COVID pandemic and is here to stay; there is still, however, a lot of work to be done to understand how it can best support the delivery of healthcare. And less successfully, the remote monitoring of COVID patients has proven to be possible, but the number of people who died at home of COVID -19 has indicated there is more to be done.

Furthermore, the lessons we learn from the pandemic in this regard can help inform not just how we assist patients with acute conditions like COVID-19, but people with far more prevalent chronic conditions. How, for example, can we better use technology to improve access to health services for all those people who have had treatments delayed or deferred because of the pressure COVID-19 placed on our hospital systems?

Preparing for the next pandemic

While the above are examples of how digital innovations have supported health, now is the time to start thinking about the expanded role digital technology and health information could play in our response to the next pandemic, and indeed to other disasters, like bushfires and floods.

It is clear that better national systems for tracking and tracing of pandemic patients and close contacts would be a real asset in a future pandemic. We need to start the development of these now, and they need to be regularly tested and updated as technology improves.

Finally, we come to the role of the My Health Record in Australia's response to the pandemic. It seems it has had no role to play. It must be asked, was this a missed opportunity and if so, what could the role of our digital health record be in a future pandemic? I believe this is a question that needs to be answered before the next Strategy is released.

I hope these comments, though high level, are helpful. I look forward to seeing the draft of the new strategy and being able to provide more detailed feedback at that time.

Your sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nadia Levin".

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