

National E-Health Transition Authority  
Quantitative Survey Report

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## Introduction

This quantitative survey was undertaken throughout the month of July 2008. In total 2,700 people were asked their opinion on a number of issues relating to the implementation of an individual electronic health record [IEHR] for all Australians. The number of respondents from each state and territory was as follows:

**NSW – 500**

**Victoria – 500**

**Queensland – 400**

**South Australia – 400**

**Western Australia – 400**

**Tasmania – 300**

**Northern Territory – 200**

Below is a summary of the survey followed by a more detailed examination of the major research findings. This section includes respondents' quotes to a number of the survey questions.

***Overall, support for the initiative is strong across all states and demographics. Major concerns are security of data and privacy issues. A strong majority of respondents want the federal government to manage the implementation and management of the IEHR. 80% of participants feel participation should be voluntary.***

## Summary of Main Points

- Over 60% of respondents rate Australia's current health system as reasonable to good yet 30% say they expect it to worsen over the next 3 years. 74% of respondents rate their own health as either good or excellent while just under 30% have a medical condition requiring ongoing treatment.
  - There is very strong support for the introduction of an IEHR. Approximately 2 out of 5 people have heard something about plans to implement an IEHR and nationally 4 out of 5 respondents are in favour of the idea (82%).
  - Just over 90% of those who support the idea of an IEHR want their own and their children's records to be included.
  - Almost 4 out of 5 respondents who are carers think that the person's records should be included yet only 62% of carers think they should be able to access the records of those they care for. Only 50% of respondents, whether they were carers or not, think carers should be able to access these records.
  - Most respondents feel GPs and treating specialists should be able to access their patients' records. Ambulance drivers are 3rd on the list at 87% while nurses are 4<sup>th</sup> on 79%.
  - There is a strongly held view that parents should be able to access their dependent children's records.
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- Less than a third of respondents note that they have sometimes been inconvenienced by their GP not having access to their current medical history. Even lower than this, only 22% of respondents claim to have some difficulty in answering questions pertaining to their own medical history.
- 66% of respondents have visited 1 or 2 GPs in the last 5 years; 8% 5 or more.
- As previous studies have clearly demonstrated people are very concerned about the security and privacy issues surrounding the implementation of an IEHR. 79% of all respondents think it's important or very important that sensitive or very personal medical information will be quarantined. Nearly all respondents think the same about the IEHR being accompanied by its own set of strict privacy laws. 97% of respondents think it's important that people will be able to clearly see who has accessed their medical records.
- Top 4 most convincing positive statements *in favour of* an IEHR are:
  - The IEHR will save lives and improve health services by having important medical information immediately accessible.
  - The IEHR will make it easier for patients as they know that their records are readily available, accurate and up to date so that any medical professional they choose can see them.
  - Chronic illness sufferers or their carers are the primary source of their own health information and sometimes people can't recall important medical details.
  - Everybody moves around these days and your medical records will always be with you regardless of where you are.
- Top 3 most convincing negative statements *against* an IEHR are:
  - It is impossible to stop hackers accessing people's records and no one knows what they might do with them.
  - Businesses like insurance companies will demand access to this information and use it against people.
  - The money spent in setting up and running an IEHR would be better spent on employing more doctors and nurses.
- 9 out of 10 respondents think the federal government should manage the implementation and management of an IEHR.
- 1% of respondents change from supporting to opposing the IEHR at the completion of the survey. Supporting is now 80% – see heading "What people say about" below. The other 1% in the 2% differential has moved to "undecided".

## **Key Findings**

### ***Australia's Health System***

The majority of respondents consider Australia to have a good health system. No state or territory stands out as being more positive than any other. Significantly, nearly 11% of the over 70 age group surveyed rate it as excellent. Coming in 2nd are those with a chronic illness, 7% of whom also rate it in the top percentile.

One third of respondents feel the health system will get worse in the next 3 years. On a positive note, 30% of Queenslanders think it will improve in the next 3 years, 5% more than the national average of those who think it will improve.

### ***What have they heard about IEHR?***

Those who have heard something about an IEHR (40%) link it to a Smart card or Australia type card. One third says that they have heard that medical authorities will have access to some kind of shared database. Some have seen mention of it on TV; others think there is an intention to bring it in but that it is a long way off from actually happening

### ***Support or oppose?***

Over half of those who support the concept of an IEHR (82%) like the fact that health professionals will have access to their patients' medical records no matter where they are. 37% of respondents who support say it is convenient, time saving and has the ability to provide a much better standard of health care. It will save lives.

In the opposition corner (18% of respondents), the main concerns are privacy and security of records. Mistrust of government generally and doubts as to where the information would end up are also significant issues.

### ***Whose records should be included?***

A clear majority of people (77%) want their own records included. Similarly, 77% of those with dependent children (32% of sample) want these records included as well. Carers (9% of sample) strongly favour the person they care for to be included.

### ***Who should have access?***

There is close to universal agreement that GPs and treating specialists should have access to their patients' IEHR. At the other end of the scale, there is some support for insurance companies (23%), current employers and prospective employers to have access to this information. These results are difficult to explain given people's strong concerns over security of information and the fear that their personal information may end up in the wrong hands.

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## **Safeguards**

People will be even more accepting of the idea of an IEHR if special attention is focussed on devising specific privacy laws governing access to the information contained within. Close behind is the importance of a process whereby people will be able to clearly see who has accessed their records. Of less importance, but still significant, is the ability of the system to quarantine sensitive or very personal medical information.

## **Statements in favour**

Of the 18 messages supporting the implementation of an IEHR, 16 statements score a plus 50% net rating. The top 4 arguments are listed above. Statements which carry the message that lives will be saved, doctors can focus on treating patients rather than taking patients' histories and people's medical records are always available no matter where they are will no doubt strike a chord with the Australian public. The contrast with the Australia card does not really impress as a strong argument for an IEHR.

## **Statements opposing**

Out of 11 arguments opposing the establishment of an IEHR only 1 scores a net of over 50%. The argument that it is impossible to stop hackers getting into the system is the most convincing argument against an IEHR.

Other arguments around insurance companies and employers using the data against people and that the money would be better spent on employing more medical professionals have some impact.

## **What people say about**

### **What they've heard about IEHR:**

*"Able to access from any doctor. No matter where you have an accident they can access your medical records."*

*"Just the fact that there are advantages to be gained by it if you change medical practitioners all your records are easily accessible. Or you go to a hospital, if you're not conscious to tell someone something, they can just get all your records. I've heard that there are some people who think it's a terrible thing, that it shouldn't be allowed, they think that because they are ignorant, or some politicians being devious with a scare mindset to them."*

*"That it, because different states have different laws, would help people moving interstate access those records."*

*"Just like an identity card..."*

*"Just that they put the information onto the laptops - only heard about it when they were doing it in NT."*

*"I think I heard on the radio news... they were just talking the proposal on the radio to put in those health information, that's all. Somebody was interviewing..."*

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### **Supporting IEHR:**

*"I think it would be great in terms of national wide access to your medical records and knowing the doctors anywhere in Australian would be good...safety as well, at some point if you were in an emergency and couldn't tell the doctors about an allergy it would be life saving."*

*"Because I have 2 different doctors and I have to keep them both up to date, and they don't have to take as much notice of me."*

*"It helps doctors too if you were admitted to hospital then they could get a good picture of what they were dealing with."*

*"If you were travelling and had to go to the doctor they'd have your medical records straightaway. You don't always get to see a regular doctor, if the records were in place you wouldn't have to go through your personal medical history every time you visited a GP."*

### **Opposing IEHR:**

*"The way that people can hack into databases, I don't think we've got good enough protection - just worried about the security and protection of it."*

*"In general you are living in your own community and you only need your own doctor. I've never had any real bad health problems and so maybe that's why it hasn't really affected me."*

*"I was refused employment after a bad accident and now I cannot get a job because employers seem to already have access to my medical record."*

*"Because it takes away your privacy."*

### **Change from support to oppose:**

*"Mainly because I think the money could be spent better on more doctors and nurses to do the work, hospitals are short staffed, as are nursing homes, if someone really wanted to have those records they could go online and set them up themselves, and we've never had any problems getting things from doctor to doctor."*

*"I thought about computer hackers and people you don't want to read it reading it, basically privacy issues."*

*"People's circumstance might change because the government might change and they might bring in new legislation that changes your opinion to do with health records and, well, they might change the access..."*

*"I would like to see a trial of it, see what happens. Some arguments were strongly convincing - relating to doctors or ambulance officers accessing in an emergency but would like more information on who would be able to access records."*

*"I'd need time to think about it. I wasn't really sure when I first said I supported it."*

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