



Setting foundations for e-health with healthcare identifiers

FAQs for Providers

nehta

National E-Health Transition Authority
www.nehta.gov.au

Real-time, secure information exchange to support better decision making

Australia's e-health future will be based on what works on a national level and efforts are well underway to develop the most secure, comprehensive and reliable technologies to form the foundations for e-health. The ultimate benefit of e-health will be a safer and more sustainable health system that is suitably equipped to respond to emerging health and cost pressures.

One of the key e-health foundations will deliver a standard process across the health sector for accurately identifying everybody involved in a healthcare transaction. This is a small step in e-health but it will go a long way to reducing medical mix-ups or an individual's information being assigned to another patient or sent to the wrong place.

E-health will enhance the way information is exchanged, shared and managed in the Australian health sector. It is a move away from a reliance on tools such as pen, paper and human memory to an environment where healthcare providers can reliably and securely access and share health information in real time, from anywhere to anywhere. The only way we can achieve this is through a world-class e-health capability.

E-health will deliver to all Australians a secure person-controlled individual electronic health record.



To realise the benefits of e-health we need a way to identify individuals seeking healthcare, and the professionals and organisations providing care

Q: What is an Individual Healthcare Identifier (IHI)?

A: An IHI is a unique 16 digit number that will be assigned to each Australian resident and others seeking healthcare in Australia. The number will be used in health information records alongside the person's name and date of birth.

Healthcare providers will be permitted to use the IHI as a unique reference number to manage and communicate patient health information as part of delivering healthcare services to their patients. The IHI will not change how and when healthcare providers share information about individuals. Patients will continue to be involved in decisions about how health information is handled by their healthcare team.

Q: What is a Healthcare Provider Identifier (HPI)?

A: Healthcare providers and organisations will also be identified with a unique number. These identifiers are referred to as:

Healthcare Provider Identifiers – Individual (HPI-I) for healthcare professionals and other health personnel involved in patient care, and

Healthcare Provider Identifiers – Organisation (HPI-O) that will identify the location (such as the hospital or health clinic) where care is provided.

Q: Why introduce Healthcare Identifiers?

A: Communication of health information is a vital part of effective healthcare. The accurate identification of individuals and providers is critical in all health communication. Both patients and providers need to be confident that the health information relates to the right person.

Using an IHI provides a way to more accurately match the right record to the patient you are treating and to improve accuracy when communicating information with other healthcare providers. Permitting healthcare providers to use the same unique reference number for each patient helps to ensure greater certainty that information will be put on the correct record.

Having HPI-I's and HPI-O's provides an additional layer of certainty to ensure that health information can be communicated accurately and efficiently. It reduces the chance that health information may be inadvertently sent to the wrong provider or organisation and improves the flow of health information to support timely decision making as part of delivering healthcare.

Q: Why not use the Medicare number for patients?

A: A Medicare number is not unique. Some people have more than one Medicare number because they are members of more than one family and may be on multiple cards. Also, not everyone who needs healthcare will have a Medicare number.

Integrated around existing electronic health initiatives, a national approach to e-health will transform the way information is used to plan, manage and deliver healthcare services.

Q: Why not use the existing Medicare provider numbers for healthcare providers?

A: Medicare provider numbers are allocated to individual providers and organisations to support payments and claims through government schemes such as Medicare Benefits and Pharmaceutical Benefits Schemes. Healthcare providers who are not eligible to bill Medicare may not have a Medicare provider number.

The format of the Medicare provider number was not intended for use in the electronic environment as an identifier and its use will therefore be limited in future e-health systems.

Q: When will Healthcare Identifiers be allocated?

A: It is planned to have the IHs allocated from mid 2010. HPI-Is and HPI-Os will also be allocated from mid 2010 through a staged approach. It is important to note that the numbers cannot be allocated and used until necessary supporting legislation is in place.

Q: Who will assign Healthcare Identifiers?

A: The national Healthcare Identifiers Service (HI Service) is being established to assign and maintain healthcare identifiers. Medicare Australia will be the initial operator of the HI Service. As a trusted government authority, Medicare has the national infrastructure, as well as the industry and community relationships needed to securely deliver and maintain the healthcare identifiers.

The HI Service will be a separate and new Medicare Australia function, not linked to its funding or claims for payment functions. As a statutory agency Medicare Australia is governed by national legislation that sets out the scope of the functions it can perform and the privacy and security it must maintain.

Q: Will you be eligible for an HPI-I?

A: Every healthcare provider who requires an identifier to support the delivery of healthcare will be issued with an HPI-I.

In practical terms, it is proposed that there be a staged implementation of HPI-Is with initial allocation given to healthcare professionals registered through the Australian Healthcare Practitioner Registration Authority (AHPRA). This will include the professions of nursing and midwifery, chiropractic, psychology, podiatry, pharmacy, optometry, osteopathy, medical, dentistry and physiotherapy. AHPRA is expected to register close to half a million healthcare professionals in the first stage, and then it will be eventually extended to all healthcare providers as agreements are established with other health professional bodies and associations.

The national e-health initiative is the first time that Australian governments have embraced end-to-end integrated e-health. Whilst this is complex it offers long-term benefits for the health sector.

Healthcare Identifiers



Q: Who will issue my HPI-I?

A: Healthcare Provider Identifiers - Individual (HPI-Is) will be issued via health professional registration bodies or direct from the HI Services Operator. Initial allocation of HPI-Is will be to healthcare professionals registered with the Australian Healthcare Practitioner Registration Authority (AHPRA) and will occur automatically as part of the registration process. The HI Service will provide HPI-Is to the registration body to issue to providers on its behalf.

Q: Which organisations will get an HPI-O?

A: Healthcare Provider Identifier – Organisation (HPI-Os) will be issued to any organisation that employs or contracts one or more health providers or a sole trader that provides a health service. Before a HPI-O is issued, the organisation or sole trader may be required to sign a participation agreement with the HI Service Operator which will set out the rules for participating in the HI Service.

Q: Do patients need to do anything to get an IHI?

A: People who are enrolled with Medicare and the Department of Veterans' Affairs will automatically be allocated an IHI. When an individual seeks healthcare, their provider will contact the HI Service (either online or via phone) to get the number.

Those who do not have a Medicare card or DVA card can be provided with a temporary IHI number when they seek healthcare. The patient can later validate this temporary number through the HI Service and this will become that individual's unique IHI. The HI Service will perform an evidence of identity process to ensure the IHI relates only to that person.

Q: How can you obtain a patient's IHI?

A: When a patient presents to you for treatment, you can obtain their IHI from the HI Service to include in the patient's healthcare records. The HI Service is being designed so as to allow you to retrieve a patient's IHI through a seamless online process using the patient's Medicare card or DVA card. You will also be able to obtain the IHI by phone in situations where online services may not be available.

An IHI will only be provided to a healthcare provider who is approved as an 'authorised user' of the service and where the use is for healthcare-related purposes. The HI Service will have in place proper security arrangements to make sure IHIs are given only to providers with the right credentials and only via a secure means. Once the IHI is obtained, you can then use it as a unique reference number on the patient's record.

If health information needs to be provided to another healthcare provider, such as in a referral or hospital discharge summary, the IHI will ensure the right information, at the right place, at the right time.

On a practical level, use of the IHI is similar to using a person's name and date of birth to reference information. A number is however a much more reliable way of referencing information, particularly in electronic information management systems. Minor errors in spelling of names or recording a date of birth can lead to information being misfiled.

Healthcare Identifiers

Q: Does a patient need an IHI to receive healthcare?

A: An IHI is not a requirement for healthcare in Australia. Nobody can be refused treatment if they do not have an IHI. If you are unable to locate a person's IHI for any reason, then you would continue to provide the health service as usual, as an IHI has no impact on access to health services.

Q: Can individuals access healthcare anonymously?

A: An IHI will not alter the way in which anonymous healthcare services are currently provided. Where it is lawful and practical, individuals can seek treatment and services on an anonymous basis. If you currently provide healthcare services on an anonymous basis, you can continue to do so and do not need to include a person's IHI on their record.

The HI Service will also provide a way for individuals to establish a pseudonym in circumstances where an individual may not wish to have their real name linked to their IHI. This process will be administered via the HI Service and will not impact on the way you provide a health service.

Q: How will healthcare identifiers improve healthcare communication?

A: There are four key areas where the use of IHIs to support the safe and secure electronic exchange of information will deliver immediate benefits for you and your family:

Discharge summaries – When a patient leaves hospital, and information about ongoing care is communicated to their healthcare provider/s, that provider will be able to more accurately match the information to the correct patient.

Pathology Tests - When patients' tests results are sent to their healthcare provider/s, that provider will be able to more accurately match the test results to the correct patient record.

Prescriptions - Pharmacists can be more confident when receiving electronically lodged scripts that the script is matched to the correct patient, resulting in safer dispensing of medications.

Referrals - When patient records and case history are communicated between the referring healthcare provider and a specialist, the specialist can more efficiently check they have the correct information for the correct patient.

As a healthcare provider, IHIs will give you more certainty that health information about an individual patient can be accurately matched to the correct record. The HPI-I is designed to work in conjunction with other national e-health initiatives, such as the standardisation of clinical terminologies and the development of secure messaging systems, to provide you with an accurate and secure foundation for sending and receiving messages and information from other providers in electronic format.

The healthcare identifier system will improve the security and quality of health information by reducing errors and clearly identifying everyone involved in a healthcare transaction.

Public Consultations

Q: What consultation has been undertaken to date?

A: On 13 July 2009 a discussion paper was released seeking comments on legislative proposals to support the establishment and implementation of unique identifiers for healthcare purposes and the privacy of health information. Consultation closed on 14 August 2009, and 90 submissions were received from stakeholders.

Q: Where can I find out more about IHIs and the national e-health agenda?

A: More detail on the strategic direction for e-health in Australia is provided in the National E-Health Strategy – visit: www.health.gov.au. Information is also available from NEHTA's website visit – www.nehta.gov.au. Additional information for consumers and healthcare providers will be made available on the Department of Health and Ageing eHealth website over the coming months – visit: www.health.gov.au.

Q: How can I contribute?

A: There will be opportunity to provide feedback on the legislative proposals for healthcare identifiers during the development of the legislation. Details will be posted on the Department of Health and Ageing eHealth website as they are available – visit: www.health.gov.au. You can also provide your views on e-health as part of the national health reform agenda set up in response to a report from the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission – visit: www.yourhealth.gov.au

Q: What role does the National E-Health Transition Authority (NEHTA) play in this work?

A: NEHTA is Australia's peak body in the design and development of government e-health initiatives. NEHTA is a joint initiative of the national, state and territory governments tasked with leading the design of e-health initiatives, including identifiers for individuals and healthcare providers.

Today, when privacy and security are more important than ever NEHTA has been proactive in complying with strict statutory requirements. We have developed six privacy guidelines to support the building blocks for e-health.



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