

MEDIA RELEASE

7 December 2004

For Immediate Release



BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR AUSTRALIANS, WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The future of electronic health records is about delivering better care to patients, according to Mr John Burns, Senior Vice President, Investment Programs Management, Canada Health Infoway, who presented at the National Health Information Summit which was officially opened by Australian Government Minister for Health and Ageing The Hon. Tony Abbott MP.

Delivering the keynote address in Melbourne, Mr Burn's provided insights into Canada's approach to the introduction of electronic health records and e-health more generally.

According to Mr Burns, "No one is saying we shouldn't introduce electronic health records in Canada, rather asking us how to do it."

"In Canada, we have significant financial support to enable us to achieve our goal of having interoperable electronic health records for 50 per cent of all Canadians by 2009," Mr Burns said.

"According to our research, more than 85 per cent of Canadians support the development of electronic health records and how they will improve their health care."

Professor Fiona Stanley AC, Chief Executive Officer Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth also presented at the Summit and discussed how data linkage has the potential to greatly improve research and essentially Australian health care.

Professor Stanley drew on the existing Western Australian Maternal and Child Health Research Database to highlight the potential benefits of linking data.

The West Australian public health research used data linkage to identify for the first time internationally the link between low levels of folate and certain birth defects. As a result, global practice has changed to support the use of folate supplementation around the time of conception and during pregnancy.

"By building collaborative networks and sharing information, data and knowledge nationally, there is a tremendous opportunity to improve health research and subsequently the health care of all Australians," said Professor Stanley.

"It's about capturing existing data and turning it into useful information," said Professor Stanley.

The Summit was also used to discuss how patients can become better informed about health issues and subsequently empowered to make decisions about their own health care.

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Professor Chris Del Mar, Chair, Health *Insite* Editorial Board, identified that to become better informed, patients are increasingly turning to the Internet, in addition to family, friends, magazines and television, to gather information about health concerns before visiting their general practitioner.

"The internet has far too much information, including 11.7 million hits for arthritis alone on www.google.com.au, as well as far too much false and misleading information," said Professor Del Mar.

"As a result patients often arrive at their general practitioner confused and with reams of printout which includes treatments that aren't valid or approved in Australia," said Professor Del Mar.

"Whilst general practitioners recognise their role in helping patients access and understand health issues, they are increasingly under time pressures and have little information immediately available to assist them," said Professor Del Mar.

"To address the issue, we have developed the information portal Health *Insite* as an immediate solution to empower patients and assist general practitioners," said Professor Del Mar. (www.healthinsite.gov.au)

The website allows people to search for specific health information, and directs the user to approved online resources.

"The site collaborates with 75 information partners to provide access to 12,000 resources and is averaging 35,000 page views per day," said Professor Del Mar.

"Health *Insite* helps patients and practitioners deal with large volumes of available information to sort out what is and isn't useful," said Professor Del Mar.

Ms Karen Curtis, Federal Privacy Commissioner, Office of the Federal Privacy Commission, used the summit to address the importance of forecasting potential privacy issues, saying privacy should be viewed as part of the solution, rather than a barrier to providing better health care for all Australians.

"Privacy is about choice, openness, data quality and data security," said Ms Curtis.

"A system with robust privacy mechanisms will ensure the patient's needs are at the centre and data is protected and available where decisions are made about treatment and care," said Ms Curtis.

"And such a system will increase trust and confidence, ultimately encouraging more patients to opt in," said Ms Curtis.

Ms Nicola Ballenden, Senior Health Policy Officer, Australian Consumers' Association, noted the importance of protecting consumer privacy, advocating during her presentation to the Summit for a system which provided Australians with:

- the choice to participate in any record keeping system;
- the right to determine who has access to their medical record and which parts of the record they have access to; and
- the right to access their own medical record and make additions and corrections.

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"We need to develop a system which meets the needs of all stakeholders, and although building such a system will take a long time, it will give us the best chance of ensuring trust in the system in the future," said Ms Ballenden.

About the National Health Information Summit

The two-day Summit brings together local and international experts to discuss how information technology can improve the Australian health care industry and:

- improve patient safety, the quality of health care and the patient-clinician relationship;
- support electronic health records and subsequent improvements in the quality of public health services and population research; and
- empower consumers and transform the patient-clinician relationship.

"It is a pivotal time in the Australian health sector as health and information technology converge and transform health care management and delivery," said Professor Andrew Coats, Australian Health Information Council Chair.

"We have a significant opportunity to realise the benefits of health and information management and information communication technology however, national collaboration is critical for long-term interoperability and connectivity across the health sector," said Ms Patricia Faulkner, National Health Information Group Chair.

The Summit is an initiative of the Australian Health Information Council and the National Health Information Group in collaboration with the Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care.

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General Media Enquiries: For access to the second day of the Summit on 7 December 2004 or further information, please contact:

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