

Fed: Electronic health records could save \$7billion a year:report

By Jane Bunce

CANBERRA, April 19 AAP - Up to \$7 billion could be saved each year if Australia's health providers shared patient data electronically, says a new report.

Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Health Research, the report argues a broadband network of health services should be created to allow patients to be tracked no matter where they go for medical services.

Monash University e-health research unit director Michael Georgeff said about one-quarter of all Australians suffered from a chronic illness and many had complex health needs.

"Chronic illness requires close monitoring and, often, intensive management by a team of health professionals," Professor Georgeff said.

"But because of the way our health system currently operates, one doctor will often not know what tests or medications have been prescribed by another doctor even when they are members of the same team."

Prof Georgeff said between 30 and 50 per cent of chronically ill patients were hospitalised because of inadequate management of their condition.

Fewer than 14 per cent were placed on government-subsidised medical care plans and less than one per cent were tracked to make sure they were sticking to them, he said, making the plans "all but useless".

"Nearly every (chronically ill patient) would be better off if the medical practitioners who care for and treat them were more in touch with each other," Prof Georgeff said in his paper E-Health and the Transformation of Health Care.

"It is hard to understand how Australians can tolerate the fact that they are not."

Tonnes of health data was already being collected in electronic form but not shared, Prof Georgeff said, while other important communications such as referrals and hospital discharge summaries were still not being handled electronically.

The report argues that improved health care sharing and better management of patients with a chronic illness would save the health care system \$1.5 billion a year.

Non-health care savings such as special foods, travel and carer expenses would free up another \$1.5 billion, and increased workforce participation and productivity could add a further \$4 billion each year to the economy, the report says.

Prof Georgeff said that for the changes to occur, the government should provide incentives for individual health services to share their information.

Instead of waiting for standard methods of data recording to be developed, Prof Georgeff said systems should be connected immediately and would naturally begin to conform to each other.

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