eHealth: supporting adoption in rural communities

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Introduction: The personally controlled electronic health system (eHealth record system) commenced operation in July 2012 and has the potential to significantly improve the way health care is delivered in rural communities. This paper will give an overview of the national eHealth record system and the potential benefits, as well as describing the support available for consumers and health care professionals in rural communities. It will also include a demonstration of the system, showing how the various components of eHealth technology are used together.

Rural health and eHealth: People living in rural communities face unique challenges in gaining access to health care. They are likely to have to travel in order to access specialist (and even generalist) health care services, often resulting in fragmented health records.

The national eHealth record system is a critical component of Australia’s eHealth strategy, and has the potential to significantly improve the way health care is delivered in rural communities. It is a secure, electronic record of a consumer’s health information, stored in a network of connected systems. The eHealth record system will bring key health information from a number of different systems together and present it in a single view.

Rural communities are a key target group for the national eHealth record system, with the benefits of participation centred on improved personal control over health information, improved continuity of care (thereby enabling improved management of chronic disease), improved coordination and follow-up post of acute episodes, and reduced adverse drug events.

Supporting adoption of eHealth: A range of initiatives is in place in order to support the adoption of eHealth in rural communities, both for consumers and health care providers. Consumers will be able to register for an eHealth record in a number of different ways, including online, by phone, and by mail. Once registered, consumers will be able to access their record via an online consumer portal. For health care providers, the system is being promoted through a broad range of rural health organisations. Additionally, the Practice Incentives Program (PIP) eHealth Incentive offers incentives for practices to set up the infrastructure required for eHealth.

Conclusion: Broad adoption of eHealth is critical to its success, and the more widely it is adopted the greater the benefits for Australians living in rural and remote communities will be. It is therefore important to continue to measure and report on uptake, and to evaluate the outcomes.