One voice matters, many voices make a difference

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News breaks first on Twitter.

If Facebook were a country, it would be the world’s third largest.

The power of social media and the internet to connect people, share ideas, news and generate momentum is increasingly evident and accepted.

The same is true for the need for consumers and consumer experience to play a critical role in health care policy and planning if we are to improve health outcomes and sustain our health system into the future.

Australia is undergoing pivotal health reform, informed by the work of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC), which said that ‘the health system of the future should be organised around the integral roles of consumer voice and choice, citizen engagement and community participation,’ and that there is a need to ensure ‘that the experience and views of consumers and whole communities are incorporated into how we redesign and improve health services in the future.’

Consumers know what works—and what doesn’t—in health care in their local community. So how do we use the opportunities afforded by the internet and social media to give consumers, especially consumers confronted with the barriers of distance and time, a say in improving health care in their community? What about those who do not have ready or reliable access to these mediums? And how do we enable the voices of many consumers to contribute to an informed and constructive consumer voice in health policy and decision making?

The presentation draws on the work of an NGO project funded by the Australian Government to support one of the key levers identified by the NHHRC for achieving system change and better health care for all Australians: ‘strengthened consumer engagement and voice’.

It will share learning from the three-year project that leverages the opportunities of the online environment to give consumers around Australia the opportunity to contribute to improving Australian health care, and provides professional development for consumer and community board members, chairs and CEOs of Medicare Locals and local hospital networks to support consumer and community engagement in the organisations charged with leading health reform for local communities.