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Researching new technologies – ehealth applications for rural communities
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In the Federal Budget on May 11 2010 the Australian Government announced a $466.7m investment over the next two years “to revolutionise the delivery of healthcare in Australia through the establishment of the national e-health records system. Every Australian will be able to check their own medical history online through the introduction of personally controlled electronic health records, which will boost patient safety, improve health care delivery, and cut waste and duplication.”

We are told that “personally controlled electronic health records will build on the foundation laid by the introduction of the Individual Healthcare Identifiers later this year. Under this, every Australian will be given a 16-digit electronic health number, which will only store a patient’s name, address and date-of-birth. No clinical information will be stored on the number, which is separate to an electronic health record.”

Any substantial investment in ehealth is welcome as long as it results in measurable improvements in access, quality and outcomes of health care delivery, especially for people living in rural and remote locations.

Australia’s rural health care workforce has long been at the forefront of research into the use of new technologies to support improvements in health care access for the people of rural and remote Australia. For example, rural clinicians have been pioneers in the implementation of early electronic health record systems in the 1980s, in the use of email and telemedicine in the 1990s and in advocating for broadband access for their communities in the early part of this new century.

This presentation will focus on past and current e-health research initiatives in rural and remote health and on some of the lessons learned from the past which need to inform future developments and implementation plans.