



AASW

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**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

*Response to the Electronic Health
Records and Healthcare Identifiers:
Legislation Discussion Paper*

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) supports the idea of the personally controlled electronic health record (PCEHR) system as it aids in the continued development of a more collaborative and less fragmented healthcare service. We are concerned with the continued lack of detail regarding the ability of professional social workers (along with other allied health professionals) to contribute their assessments, event summaries and specialist letters to the record. While the discussion paper acknowledges this is an area of concern (p. 7), the document does not provide any reference as to how these issues will be addressed. Furthermore, the AASW continues to advocate for those who are experiencing or have experienced family violence by highlighting the limits to confidentiality, anonymity and the increased potential for harm that can be a result of a centralised, and easily accessed, health record.

Professional social work in primary healthcare

Social work is a professional discipline that recognises that social problems and barriers experienced by individuals, families, groups, and communities are multi-causal and require not only in-depth knowledge of human motivation and behaviour but also knowledge of systems, cultures and the impact of social policy on personal, community and social wellbeing. All these factors impact on the health status of individuals and the community. This interactive focus on the individual and the systemic distinguishes the theory and practice of social work in primary care from other helping professions and shapes the methods of engagement, support and intervention offered.

Professional social work skills and supports have historically been integral to primary healthcare services. Social workers, particularly because of their expertise in addressing both personal and systemic dimensions of support and intervention, have had a strong role in assessment, planning and case management across all types of service provisions. A further skill of social workers is to facilitate collaboration in a multidisciplinary and multiagency environment and to ensure an integrated approach to address the particular needs of the person, family or community.

Social work and electronic health records

The AASW supports the concerns raised, and solutions offered, by Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA) in their position statement regarding the access of allied health professionals to update electronic health records.¹ Social workers provide a vital component of multidisciplinary care by focusing on the psychosocial aspects of chronic health. The ability of social workers to contribute to the formal medical record is crucial for achieving best-practice care. Furthermore, we support AHPA's concerns regarding the limited number of compliant software packages available, their prohibitive cost and the few funding incentives available for allied health professionals in comparison to GPs and community pharmacies.

¹ AHPA, Position Statement: Important access to update electronic health records, AHPA Website, June 2014

The AASW endorses AHPA's call to action to amend policy to allow allied health professionals to upload event summaries and specialist letters in personally controlled electronic health records (PCEHR) via the Provider Portal.

PCEHR, privacy and family violence

While the AASW supports the proposed changes to privacy and security, we still have further questions about how the PCEHR deals with issues of confidentiality for individuals who seek anonymous or confidential care. We have particular concerns in regards to how the system acknowledges the dynamics and complexities of family violence as those experiencing abuse may be forced, through coercion, to give perpetrators access to their record resulting in care ceasing to be confidential. This could contribute to an escalation of abuse and potentially deter individuals from seeking support from their healthcare provider as they no longer have the assurance of confidentiality.

There are no simple solutions when dealing with these issues but AASW members have specialist practice knowledge and experience and are ready to contribute. The AASW would welcome the opportunity to assist the government develop proposals to address these issues.

Conclusion

Social workers provide a vital contribution to multidisciplinary service delivery in primary care. While the PCEHR has the potential to improve the quality of health information available, its success in part is dependent on the ability of social workers and other allied health practitioners to access and update the electronic health records. Most importantly the system needs to better understand the dynamics of family violence and abuse, and specifically violence against women, and how these may impact confidentiality, privacy and personal safety.

Submitted for and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers Ltd



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