

THE E-HEALTH PERSONAL RECORD

Buried in the bewildering details and proposals of the recent National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC) Interim Report (December 2008) was a simple sentence that stressed the centrality of the personal electronic health record to coordinated health care.

Indeed, the Commission's Chairwoman, Dr Christine Bennett, claims: "*An electronic health record ... is arguably the single most important enabler of truly person-centred care.*"* But its utility reaches beyond this. The efficiency and effectiveness of e-health will undoubtedly cut expenditure, as its multiplier effects improve continuity of care, reduce both errors and duplication of services, and ultimately promote health care.

Understandably, both the profession and the public have become increasingly cynical about the continual talk fests generated by federal government commissions and inquiries. As a consequence, the Prime Minister and his Ministers are seen as shadowy figures, hiding behind the seeming busyness of endless inquiries. The resounding image is one of "all talk and no action".

Consider e-health as an example. E-health has been the subject of serious state and federal attention since at least 1993! Add to the NHHRC report the National E-Health Strategy report (also released in December 2008), and it could be said that drowning in reports is all that has been achieved.

Is it not time to stop the talk and walk the talk? The Prime Minister appears to be in search of an infrastructure project that mirrors the iconic status of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme in Australian folklore. Bringing e-health personal records on stream would be such a project.

Given that we spend about 9.5% of our gross domestic product on health, the cost of instituting such a scheme would be comparatively negligible. Let's settle on a definite delivery date and a dedicated budget for the e-health personal record. Now, that would be an incisive and iconic move forward!



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* Metherell M. Just what the doctors ordered. *Sydney Morning Herald* 2009; 21 Feb: 9.