



By CLAIRE McENTEE - The Dominion Post | Monday, 27 October 2008

## Fresh look at patient records

**The Health Ministry will take a fresh look at the use of electronic health records next year as part of a review of its health information strategy.**

Medical information is currently shared between health providers electronically, but an electronic health record would hold a complete summary of a patient's health information.

Health Minister David Cunliffe says while there are no firm plans to develop a single electronic health record for New Zealanders, the ministry will review the health information strategy "with a focus on identifying the information solutions required to support an integrated system of health care delivery for New Zealand.

"This review will include the role and use of electronic health records."

Health systems were thrown into the spotlight last week when The Dominion Post reported three patients had suffered serious health complaints due to problems with referrals.

An elderly man had a major stroke after two urgent referrals for surgery went astray between Palmerston North and Wellington hospitals.

Orion Health chief executive Ian McCrae has urged New Zealand to adopt electronic health records but says it would be "inappropriate" to conclude they are needed to address the problem with referrals.

The problem could be solved by automating the transfer of referrals, he says. In New Zealand and most parts of the world these transfers are currently done on paper.

Orion Health supplies electronic health records software to customers in Canada, Spain, Scotland and Australia.

Health and disability commissioner Ron Paterson said the cases highlighted the need for a national system for handling referrals between district health boards.

National Party health spokesman Tony Ryall says it is not National policy to introduce electronic health records, but the party could look at this in the future.

"Ultimately New Zealanders want an electronic health record because one of the greatest frustrations patients have is they have to tell their story umpteen times to every health professional they meet.

"But they [electronic health records] are some time away. What we really need to start doing is make sure basic electronic communications are massively improved." Health Ministry principal medical advisor David Galler said work was under way to introduce an electronic referrals system from GPs to hospitals, and a similar system between district health boards over the next two years.

The Health Information Strategy Advisory Committee is overseeing these projects.

Mr Cunliffe recently announced a revamp of the committee, which will advise the minister on health IT rather than working on projects from the "bottom up" as it previously did.

The committee will continue to focus on implementing electronic referrals and discharge summaries, electronic prescribing, lab orders and patient information management, he says. Its members include ACC chief information officer Graeme Osborne and former Telecom chief technology officer Murray Milner.

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