

Call for overhaul of patient records

By Hamish Fletcher

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Overhauling the way healthcare providers store and share patient records could revolutionise treatment in New Zealand, says a leading developer of health IT.

Auckland-based Orion Health builds systems that allow individual hospitals and clinics to share a patient's medical history and last year signed a multimillion-dollar contract with the Alaskan state health system. The deal extends the reach of Orion's technology, which covers 35 million patients in 30 countries.



Orion's Ian McCrae says New Zealand's size enables changes to be made more easily.

Photo / Kenny Rodger

It introduces the Software As a Service model of data management, and will allow patient information to be transferred and accessed remotely across Alaska.

While Orion cashes in on global shifts in health IT, New Zealand continues to move slowly and a nationally shared network of patient data may be four years in the making.

National IT Health Board director Graeme Osborne said that although a national service would take longer to arrive, moves were in place to give district health boards the ability to share some patient information regionally by 2012.

While acknowledging that the health sector moved slowly, Orion chief executive Ian McCrae said New Zealand had the perfect opportunity to be a leader in healthcare IT, but must decide to take it.

"New Zealand has a stark choice of either being a follower and watching everyone else in the world or we can be a leader, and for a small country we should be a leader.

"We can make changes in this country which you can not do in America, not even in Australia, because we're small."

McCrae said that only strong leadership would bring change.

"It [needs] inspired governance, it won't happen organically. With a bit of insightful thinking, New Zealand could be a leader in health care innovation," he said.

If New Zealand moved to the same style of system being implemented in Alaska, McCrae said hospitals would be able to reduce costs and deliver better services.

"You get huge cost savings by having doctors informed and if you really get smart about it, not only are they informed, they can be proactive and you can have disease management programmes which not only keep patients healthier, but you keep them out of hospital."

McCrae said some patients could be monitored from home electronically, reducing congestion in hospitals.

As well as benefits to patients, McCrae said Software As a Service would allow smaller technology developers the freedom to share their ideas with hospitals.

"The [current] contracting process kills innovation."

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