

Orion Health Rolls Out e-Referral to Connect GPs and Hospital in Australian Capital Territory

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The Australian Capital Territory Department of Health (ACT Health) has chosen two Auckland, New Zealand-based companies - Orion Health Pty Ltd., provider of healthcare integration and clinical workflow technology, and its JV company, HealthLink, a Primary Care Integrator - to deliver a complete, electronic referral management solution (e-Referrals).

ACT Health offers healthcare and health-related services through the Capital Region Cancer Service; Community Health, Mental Health ACT, Calvary Hospital and Canberra Hospital; Rehabilitation Service, Aged care and Population Health, such as the Health Protection Service. Accredited to the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS), the government body lays down health policies and plans health service delivery.

ACT Health implemented the joint e-Referrals solution from Orion Health and HealthLink, which stirred up considerable interest within the clinical community due to its ability to provide visibility to a general practitioner (GP) of the referral process in The Canberra Hospital (TCH), a tertiary referral center. The solution is designed to generate electronic referrals in real-time, for transfer from primary care to specialists or urgent care. Designed to manage the referral through completion, the solution provides alerts on any changes to the status of the referral, and also enables GPs to track its progress for timely treatment, by ensuring that appointment schedules are made and met on time by patients. Additionally, the solution would aid the staff at TCH to better prioritize case loads.

ACT Health recorded positive response with the e-Referral solution that was piloted early June, and is currently being employed by more than 30 GPs to refer patients to more than 60 specialists in outpatient services. ACT further expects to use the system to facilitate patient referral between all providers across ACT and in nearby regions. It also has future plans to extend the implementation to other services at TCH and additional GPs in the region and nearby areas.

Supporting the role of an e-Referral system in enhancing care processes, Chris Stephens, Orion Health's Regional Manager, states that about 40% enhancement of productivity and faster processing of urgent and semi-urgent referrals was recorded with the implementation of a similar system in New Zealand's Hutt Valley DHB.

The general practitioner plays the role of a gatekeeper in referring patients to secondary care, by deciding on when and to whom a patient needs to be referred to. According to the Australian Standard AS 4700.6-2004, a referral is defined as "the communication, with the intention of initiating care transfer, from the provider making the referral to the receiver". Considered vital for good clinical care, a referral document comprises of demographics, considerable amount of administrative information, as well as clinical data pertaining to the reason for referring: enough information to aid the secondary caregivers in providing optimal patient care for both simple and complex clinical cases.

According to a study in the journal *Pediatrics*, 96% of cases receive optimum care by primary care physicians who have referral data, in contrast to 35% of times when they have no access to the information. With the growing interactions within and between healthcare sectors, there is an increasing requirement for efficiency and streamlined exchange of referrals among caregivers.

Similar to most current processes dealing with healthcare-related documentation, paper-based referral documents have been associated with certain drawbacks such as illegibility, data entry errors, data duplication, or insufficient updates on the referral's status, which can translate into adverse outcomes and problems in patient care. Information technology is recognized as a key potential enabler of this approach of coordinating healthcare services and integrating the care of patients with other professionals.

The concept of electronically and securely, transferring referral requests between medical groups, with consent, has been employed in Victoria, one of Australia's most urbanized states. Various projects, aimed at enhancing the integration and coordination of care delivery, have been initiated over the years to encourage GPs in the state to participate in e-Referrals. The state's primary care physicians and its Department of Human Services (DHS) have established certain stepping stones to allow and evolve the e-Referral practice. These include the Victorian Service Coordination Practice Manual; an electronic service directory; the Service Coordination Tool Templates (SCTT), used by more than 580 services to document information on consumers; and guidelines for vendors to deploy the SCTT by leveraging agency client management applications. The e-Referral practice in Victoria has been supported by ConnectingCare, a not-for-profit project, S2S Electronic Service Coordination system (S2S-ESCS) provided by Infoxchange Australia, a national provider of information and communication technology services and ArgusMessenger software product offered by Argus.

The e-Referral Architecture Framework by Victoria DHS recognized certain drivers for e-Referral use; some of which include better client care through the support of service coordination processes, use of resources more effectively, fewer forms for client data exchange, and re-use of a particular episode's referral information for multiple service providers.