

Clinical Governance in the dynamic digital health and telehealth services arena

Janelle Painter, Michael Araco, Gail Hart, Maureen Robinson
Healthdirect Australia

Introduction

Technological advances are fostering growth in telehealth and digital health services internationally. Healthdirect Australia is a government funded not-for-profit organisation that procures and manages telehealth and digital health services across Australia to provide 24/7 access to health professionals, trusted health information and advice.

Our vision to increase people's access to quality health services and information requires dynamic clinical governance to ensure the clinical integrity of our services. Our robust Clinical Governance Framework focuses on safety, access and equity, efficiency, effectiveness, consumer acceptance and appropriateness.

Technology Brief

Our services include healthdirect, which includes a nurse triage helpline, website, and mobile app. The website and app both provide online access to a range of health and medicines information, a Symptom Checker tool for people to check their symptoms and get advice about what action to take, and a service finder tool linked to the National Health Services Directory. Other national services we manage include the after hours GP helpline; Pregnancy, Birth and Baby (a helpline, video call, and website) My Aged Care (a helpline and website) and Carer Gateway (a helpline and website). Trusted information partner organisations provide quality, trusted content for publication on our websites.

An important feature of our services is connecting people between the helplines and online resources. For example, people may search for health information on the website then proceed to checking their symptoms via the Symptom Checker. The Symptom Checker provides advice about an appropriate point of care depending on the responses provided. The Symptom Checker is linked to the service finder which provides advice on local health services. Some people may be advised to contact the healthdirect helpline and can "Click to call", for a seamless transfer on a mobile device. A record of the caller's Symptom Checker responses is available to the nurse when speaking to the caller. The nurse can then triage the caller and provide appropriate advice. Consumers can also contact the helplines directly for assessment of current symptoms, advice and information.

Implementation Processes

The Clinical Governance Framework has an integrated committee structure. Our Clinical Governance Advisory Group provides advice about best-practice, nationally consistent telehealth and digital health service delivery. This committee reports to the Board and presides over several Service Improvement and Development Committees which discuss clinical and operational issues for each service. Membership may include service providers, internal and external stakeholders, clinical, operational and consumer representatives.

Continuous improvement of our services is essential to service quality, organisational capability and innovative service delivery. Improvements are achieved through monitoring and identifying areas for improvement. Some processes are helpline customer satisfaction surveys, website user experience feedback forms, incidents and complaints monitoring and management, data reviews, and audits. Enhancements to our online healththesaurus using health literacy principles for digital services is an example of a service enhancement.

Clinical care impact

Key insights include considering consumer safety and conducting user research before launching new tools and services to inform direction and improvements. Other insights are that tools can be confusing for consumers and they may find them harder to use than anticipated, and consumers use tools in ways we don't expect them to. Explaining service limitations assists in managing consumer expectations.

The key impact of our services is that consumers are assisted to seek health information and advice that is most appropriate for them at the time. Sustained growth in the number of interactions demonstrates that digital health and telehealth services are efficient, accessible and acceptable to consumers.

Conclusion – outcomes and lessons learnt

In 2016 over fourteen million consumers accessed one of our services. The benefits to Australians include equitable access to safe, appropriate, sustainable and cost effective health services regardless of geographical distance. Healthdirect Australia achieved full accreditation in 2016 on its initial organisation wide survey from the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards, demonstrating the high level of quality across all our operations.