

Australian Information Industry Association

Submission on the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

15 December 2023

Introduction

The Australian Information Industry Association ('the AIIA') thanks the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for the opportunity to respond to its COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

This submission highlights the importance of digital technologies in keeping the broader Australian economy running and in delivering patient care during the COVID-19 years. Notwithstanding, there were lessons from the inconsistent use of modern technologies and the lack of integration of hardware software, people, processes, information, and information technology systems that resulted in poor communication and outcomes.

The AIIA emphasises the need for the Government to continue investing in digital infrastructure and technologies, building on the rapid digital transformation that occurred during those intervening years and in line with new citizen expectations. The Government, society and industry must develop a long-term strategy to continue the productivity gains as well as to build the concepts of virtual care – such as video consultations, remote monitoring, and online clinical management - into mainstream healthcare delivery in a post-COVID world. Our vision must be for virtual care not as an exception or backup to in-person care, but as a core component of care that is part and parcel of how patients, clinicians and clinical teams interact. This ensures Australia is prepared for future pandemics.

Australian digital experience during COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caught Australia unprepared. The lack of strategic funding, procurement and standards resulted in poor or inconsistent application of modern technologies. The following are some documented experiences.

I. Experience in the Government sector, with secondary benefits to the broader economy

There were barriers in the Government OpEx funding models. Many Government-purchased IT was bought for an initial lifecycle and defaults to run for much longer. The outbreak of COVID-19 accelerated three years-worth of digital transformation by completing it in three months, ensuring capability uplifts across the Government. This concerted effort resulted in innovative approaches to work for its employees and service delivery to the public. The broader economy benefited from flexible working arrangements, remote learning, remote court hearings, and more.

The rapid Government digital transformation attests to how digital leadership in Government is possible once the Government sets its mind on it. It also proves ongoing benefits in service delivery to the Australian community. The digital experience also lifts citizens expectations in Government services.

II. Experience in the Healthcare sector

Lack of agile funding and procurement

The outbreak of COVID-19 caused the Australian Health community to take reactionary measures. This includes the use of legacy technology, which is explained further in the immediately following section.

Lack of integration of new systems and default to legacy technology

There was a significant variation in the quality, sophistication, and integration of technology platforms (e.g. hardware, software, people, processes, and information), causing barriers to adopt modern digital tools. There were also a lack of standards (e.g. cyber security standards) encompassing the use of these systems to instil trust to overcome these barriers.

For example, Australia saw an uptake in virtual models of care across a range of patient groups including within cancer care facilities, hospital geriatric teams and aged care facilities. While health services have seen a six to eight-fold increase in the use of video consultations since the outbreak of the pandemic, the majority of telehealth consultations remain by telephone.

In another example, despite the availability of end-to-end electronic prescribing and dispensing at the onset of the pandemic, prescription processes were a challenge in making the transition to virtual care for many individuals, with scripts being faxed to pharmacies ahead of the accelerated rollout of e-prescribing using cloud technologies.

Lack of accessibility

Patients struggled to access care due to lack of digital infrastructure. Some patients turn off their video to save on data costs, while clinicians often default to the telephone when connection or microphone issues come into play. Some rural and remote health services would like to benefit from better telehealth but struggle with bandwidth or network access issues.

Switching between platforms and operating on the basis of an ad-hoc hybridisation of platforms such as phone, email and video consultation resulted in lack of coherence and security of patient-clinician engagements.

Future State: Long-term solutions to create reliable, available, relevant, complete, secure platforms for improved patient care.

Building on the recent rapid acceleration in telehealth and virtual care, Australia must now power the next wave of virtual care.

To ensure virtual care is sufficiently interoperable and collaborative, governments must facilitate the greater adoption of digital tools and multi-party co-working platforms, enabled by an expansive procurement panel and a long-term strategy of procurement and integration. To support this journey, governments must prioritise the application of appropriate technical standards for telehealth and ICT-enabled consultations in Australia.

Digital literacy and digital inclusion are essential to healthy take up of virtual care. Governments must invest in relevant campaigns in the health care context for consumers, carers, and clinicians.

Summary of recommendations

Stage	Recommendations
Design and plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinicians and consumers must be engaged as co-designers in the development of models of digital health care. • All governments, Commonwealth, State and Territory continue to prioritise the application of appropriate technical standards for telehealth and ICT-enabled consultations in Australia.
Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government to invest in myGov platform – the key national digital identity infrastructure – to enable access to government services and real-time tracking to stop the spread of highly infectious diseases. • Governments invest in funding infrastructure at the state and federal levels to progress telehealth towards meaningful, fully leveraged virtual care. • Governments investigate procurement reform for telehealth ensuring procurement habits are agile, frequently refreshed, and expansive. • Governments fund capable in-home virtual care to reduce inappropriate or unnecessary hospital or clinic attendance, using a public health and allocative efficiency approach in virtual care.
Adopt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hospitals, practice managers, and government agencies adopt digital health tools and multi-party coworking platforms. • Governments adopt an expansive procurement panel and enact long-term strategies of procurement and integration for virtual care and digital health tools. • Government and telecommunications industry to incentivise the public's full use of video platforms, reducing socioeconomic and regional divides.
Secure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater allocation of funding and resources for IT security for all agencies, hospitals, and practices. • Practices and hospitals engage in coordinated risk assessments and mitigation strategies for virtual care processes, with security oversight of each component in the virtual care solution.
Educate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combat the notion that virtual care constitutes second-rate or second-class care. Virtual care should not be viewed as simply substitution but as a substantive and valuable augmentation to traditional models of care. • Governments invest in digital inclusion and digital literacy campaigns in the health care context for consumers, carers, and clinicians to enhance take up of virtual care tools.

Conclusion

The AIIA and its members stand ready to assist in facilitating the growth and maturity of virtual care through industry collaboration. This submission is informed by the AIIA's 'Beyond Telehealth: Towards Virtual Care' white paper, which has further case studies and details.¹ Should you have any questions about the content of this submission please contact Ms Siew Lee Seow, General Manager, Policy and Media at siewlee@aiia.com.au.

Yours sincerely
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About the AIIA

The Australian Information Industry Association (AIIA) is Australia's peak representative body and advocacy group for those in the digital ecosystem. We are a not-for-profit organisation to benefit members, which represents about 300 companies and 900,000 employed in the tech sector in Australia. Since 1978, the AIIA has pursued activities to stimulate and grow the digital ecosystem, to create a favourable business environment for our members and to contribute to Australia's economic prosperity.

We do this by delivering outstanding member value by:

- providing a strong voice of influence
- building a sense of community through events and education
- enabling a network for collaboration and inspiration; and
- developing compelling content and relevant and interesting information.

We are unique in that we represent the diversity of the tech ecosystem from small and medium businesses, start-ups, universities, and digital incubators through to large Australian companies, multinational software and hardware companies, data centres, telecommunications companies, and technology consulting companies.

¹ The AIIA, 'Beyond Telehealth: Towards Virtual Care' 2021 ([link](#))