

Guest editors' introduction to special issue on HIC 2006

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This issue of the journal showcases five of the top ranked papers from the 2006 Australian Health Informatics Conference. The range of areas covered in this edition reflects the broad field of health informatics. The articles draw attention to some of the challenges facing health informaticians. Traditionally patient information, whether manual or electronic, is created and stored in the site where it originates. This can be a hospital, community care centre, specialist or general practice surgery. Patients, however, do not limit themselves to one service area; moreover they move seamlessly through diverse health sectors in different locations. The clinical and administrative information relating to their various health care episodes is not necessarily communicated between these settings. The increased use of information and communication technologies, particularly clinical information systems, should facilitate information sharing between different health care organisations and diverse health professionals. Sharing health information electronically is not without difficulty with issues related to system interoperability, clinical terminologies, security and privacy which all need to be addressed. Consumers must be engaged and have confidence in this process. However, if electronic health information is shared in a secure and timely way patient care can be enhanced. Rather than perpetuate 'information silos' which encourage the hoarding of data, there would be a move towards seamless care resulting in less duplication of

tests and medical effort [1].

The value of using information and communication technologies (ICT) to improve health outcomes and efficiencies in the delivery of health care are also highlighted in this edition. The whole area of benefits realization within the health informatics field requires considerable work. We need to progress beyond broad statements of the desired benefits of clinical information systems, such as improvements in the efficiency of care delivery and patient outcomes, to articulating specific indicators and the metrics by which these will be measured. An important part of this process is specifying the mechanisms by which the ICT intervention will bring about the desired benefits. It is clear that multi-method approaches to the evaluation of benefits is required to fully capture the complexity of these interventions [2]. It has also become apparent that we need to be mindful of the unexpected consequences that systems might bring and have effective ways of detecting and monitoring such effects [3].

With an international shortage of health informatics professionals there is a large volume of work to complete by a small, but often dedicated group. It is inspiring to see researchers and practitioners making their mark and more importantly sharing experiences and expertise with their colleagues through the publication of their work. It is only by sharing and building on the work of each other that we will advance the discipline of health informatics.

References

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