



Unravelling the e-health myths

With the launch date for the personally controlled electronic health record (PCEHR) looming, *Mark O'Brien* asks RACGP e-health spokesperson Dr Mike Civil to unpick some myths and false expectations.

DR MIKE Civil holds that amid all the discussion and confusion about the new e-health records system, it is important to remember the government only ever promised that patients would be able to register for an electronic record on 1 July, not that the PCEHR system would be fully operational – though he concedes many questions need to be answered.

"I think something will be delivered on July 1, but what that will actually be is the big question," he says.

"I feel pretty confident patients will be able to register by that date, but I'm pretty pessimistic we will be able to do much else.

"Some of the ancillary work is starting to generate interest and some general practice organisations are supplying guides to help GPs get ready for the introduction of the system but we're still a bit light on the details.

"I think we have got our heads around

what the concept is for the system broadly, but how it will practically impact on a GP sitting with a patient is obviously a big question.

"There's an expectation out there that if a patient walks in on 1 July you will be able to start filling in the record, but we have no idea whether that's true."

Dr Civil said the results of a recent Cegecim survey of 150 GPs on behalf of MO, which revealed just 5% were confident they knew what would be expected of them when the PCEHR was introduced, did not surprise him.

"I still have concerns about the level of awareness and knowledge about the PCEHR within general practice, even within my own practice," he said.

"But I think the gaps across the state or across the country would be even more worrying."

The combination of inflated expectations and poor understanding of the practicalities could dampen the enthusiasm of the profession according to Dr Civil, who said a slow rollout was probably the best way forward.

"If the launch is a bit of a fizzle it might do the PCEHR some favours," he said. "It would give us some time to build awareness within the profession."

"If on 1 July patients are able to register, that will be good, but if they start

walking in off the street and saying, 'I've registered – now what?', that will create a lot of headaches for GPs.

"In the long term I have no doubt it will improve patient care for the section of the community that most needs help, patients with chronic disease or elderly patients who may not be able to relate the information on their record quickly and easily.

"It will allow patients to attend an ED or another GP while they are travelling, and the practitioner can access the

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information in their summary, see what medication they are taking and what has happened to them medically in the past.

"You only have to look at the success of the electronic record program in the Northern Territory to understand the benefits, but just as it has taken time for the territory system to get up and running, the same will be true of the PCEHR."

Dr Civil said there were a number of benefits that would quickly become appar-

ent once the PCEHR was up and running. "You're going to avoid the pitfalls of prescribing the wrong medications to particularly vulnerable patients," he said.

"It will prevent over-investigating, over-treating, or over-managing patients."

He also accepts the concerns of many of his colleagues over the possibility that records may be missing information that individual patients have decided they don't want on the record but which is important for the GP to know.

"But the PCEHR is just an additional aid to help you manage the patient in front of you, and not only do patients not have to tell you everything now but they may have elected to go to different doctors for different problems."

However with the benefits come a cost to GPs both in time and money – though like many aspects of the PCEHR, Dr Civil says this too remains an unknown.

"To prepare a quality record will take time but I don't know how long it will take me to upload information from my system to a PCEHR and there are concerns about the partial success with electronic record systems in other countries.

"If, in a year's time, we can say we are seeing wave one sites working, the wave two sites filling up and people wanting to join wave three sites, then that will be a very good result."