

Executive Summary

This Management Framework has been developed by NEHTA to guide changes in the Australian e-health standards development environment. These changes include the establishment of a new national effort to develop, maintain and disseminate a range of clinical data standards and terminologies. Its purposes are to inform key stakeholders – the suppliers, purchasers and implementers of e-health technologies as well as organisations associated with standardization – and other interested parties about future directions for the development of e-health standards in Australia, and to encourage wider participation.

E-health standards have substantial benefit potential on two fronts. They underpin cross-sectoral health service improvement. Until health information technology (IT) standards are more fully implemented, the health care industry cannot ensure that its systems will be capable of exchanging data with other systems when needed, and consequently will not be able to reap the efficiency, clinical care, and public health benefits associated with interoperability. Standards can also provide a lever for economic development via greater and faster expansion of health software markets.

Standards development organisations (SDOs) worldwide are facing challenges to their traditional modes of operation. They are not restricted to e-health, but are associated with factors such as globalisation, the increasing pace of change and greater use of market mechanisms by governments. These challenges include perceptions that standards development is too slow; over-reliance on “voluntary” involvement from individuals or organisations, and steady, long-term declines in the resourcing provided by governments and large corporations. There are also many different organisations engaged in e-health standardization, and their activities are not always well coordinated. An additional challenge for Australia is that a substantial amount of health software is imported, embodying international standards and potentially requiring expensive modification to meet Australian requirements.

Responses to these changes and challenges in Australia will include:

1. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of standards development organisations, particularly NEHTA and Standards Australia.

In managing clinical terminologies and clinical data sets for electronic communication nationally, NEHTA is likely to become Australia’s largest source of e-health specifications, and will publish, manage and maintain standards and related material on an ongoing basis. NEHTA will also develop or commission a range of technical specifications and a standards catalogue, the latter providing national direction on standards adoption and application.

Standards Australia will continue to develop health informatics standards through its Health Informatics Technical Committee (IT-014).

2. Establishing an E-Health Standards Forum, involving the participation of peak agencies engaged in standardization, to assist with ensuring a coherent national agenda that spans the public and private health sectors as well as the health information technology industry.
3. For standards required for national e-health infrastructure, encouraging strong adherence to the disciplines of project management and the active engagement of all interested parties, rather than just the more motivated. Closer alignment will also be sought between health IT projects and standards development. This will require suppliers, purchasers and implementers to schedule standards development activities into their work programs, but is nonetheless more efficient and effective than subsequent modification to incorporate standards.
4. Using existing international and national standards where feasible. This means seeking to ensure that Australian requirements are incorporated into high priority international standards, and that the multiple uses of standards e.g., as a basis for administrative reporting and research as well as electronic communication and