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AMSANT Submission

To the

2011 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

AMSANT is the peak body for Aboriginal community-controlled health services (ACCHSs) in the Northern Territory and has played a pivotal role in advocating for and supporting the development of community-controlled health. A crucial factor has been its membership of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Forum (NTAHF), a tripartite health planning body that brings AMSANT together with the health departments, forming arguably the most effective health partnership of any jurisdiction in Australia.

One of the most important developments in Aboriginal community control has been in relation to comprehensive primary health care in the NT. Currently over half the Aboriginal medical services in the NT are community controlled. On the back of the demonstrated effectiveness of these services, the NT and Australian Government have united on a plan to transition all NT Aboriginal primary health care services to community control over time.

One area where ACCHSs in remote and regional areas are still constrained is in access to affordable telecommunications infrastructure. Particularly in remote locations the majority of ACCHSs have very limited access to city priced and quality services. This is one of the biggest barriers to engaging with improving ehealth systems.

ADSL2 is unheard of; ADSL is a rarity; Next G and satellite are common which have variable quality (sometimes lower speed and higher latency). There are still quite a number of remote to very remote sites that are totally reliant on relatively poor quality satellite services.

For many sites the only solution to service improvement is to access high quality/high bandwidth satellite services, services which are prohibitively expensive and out of reach. Consumer grade services tend to be significantly contended (i.e. many users sharing the same link) and therefore subject to latency (slowness) issues, not to mention the impact of summer storms across the Top End.

Digital Economy - Questions to think about

Do you currently use the internet, telephones or other telecommunications services?

- All AMSANT member services are reliant on telecommunication and internet services for both health and business function.
- Currently the budgets of health services do not generally allow for commercial grade internet connections. In urban settings this means ADSL 2 which is more than adequate. In rural and remote settings however services rely on Next G and consumer grade satellite connections. These services are generally highly contended and do not offer a high Quality of Service (QoS).

Do you take part in the digital economy at the moment? If so, how do you take part?

- All AMSANT member services use the internet for internet banking. This can involve the transfer of large encrypted files for:
 - Payroll payments
 - Supplier payments
- All AMSANT member services receive pathology reports from private pathology providers through both email and web portals.

Would you like more opportunities to take part in the digital economy?

- The ability to engage with the digital economy is becoming critical to health service business function. In the future it will require reliable internet services with a high QoS and low contention rates hitherto not found in remote settings on consumer grade connections.

Government Services - Questions to think about

Have you used telecommunications services to communicate with the government?

- All AMSANT member services communicate with the NT Governments Shared Electronic Health Record (SEHR). This happens as an automated function within the electronic Clinical Information Systems (CIS) deployed in all AMSANT member services. It allows health services to send patient summary data to the shared repository and view records of transient patients.
- All AMSANT member services report on a set of agreed NT Key Performance Indicators for Aboriginal health. This is done automatically from health service CIS and sent to the NT repository through secure messaging
- All AMSANT member services lodge Medicare claims through the “Medicare –on-line” portal. This is an automatic link within the CIS and happens immediately a patient consultation is completed
- All AMSANT member services receive hospital discharge summaries through secure message delivery

This could include the governments at all levels:

- **federal**
 - All ACCHSs are about to begin reporting to Federal funders through a web portal called “Ochre Streams”. This portal will also have a Quality Improvement (QI) function that will allow health services to analyse data utilising functions within the “Ochre Streams” web-portal
 - All AMSANT member services lodge Medicare claims through the “Medicare –on-line” portal. This happens as an automated function within the electronic Clinical Information Systems (CIS) deployed in all AMSANT member services. It happens immediately a patient consultation is completed
- **state**
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If you did use telecommunications services to communicate with government, what kind of experience did you have?

- The standard of internet connection is critical to the success of electronic communications
- Downloading of large documents with colour pictures or complex images can be haphazard over consumer grade satellite connections

Do you use telecommunications services to find out about government services and programs? If so, please tell us how you did this or what information you found.

- All AMSANT member services use the internet to communicate with Government on matters of :
 - Funding submissions
 - Submitting reports

Do you have any ideas about how we can improve the way we use these services?

- Internet portal reporting and eHealth functionality is now a key part of primary health care delivery. To meet future use of reporting and eHealth initiatives will require reliable internet services with a high QoS and low contention rates hitherto not found in remote settings on consumer grade connections.

Education & Training Questions to think about

Have you used telecommunications services as part of your education or training? If so, we'd like to know about your experience.

- AMSANT member services operating regional health services use telecommunications to deliver:
 - in-service training
 - Provide regular staff updates
- AMSANT support staff provide training and support to member services on CIS usage via the internet using software like:
 - "TeamViewer"
 - "GoToMeeting"
 - "Skype"

Health Questions to think about

Have you used telecommunications services for health treatment or advice? If so, we'd like to know about your experience.

- Technology plays a core role in the delivery of primary health care services through the use of clinical information system software to manage and record activities related to patient care.
- AMSANT member health services are heavily dependent on telecommunications for the following activities:
 - Viewing of medical records from central data bases
 - Transfer of clinical records between clinics
 - Transfer of health summaries to the NT Shared Electronic Health Record
 - Viewing of the NT Shared Electronic Health Record

- Sending of pathology requests
- Receiving of pathology results
- Receiving of imaging results
- Electronic referrals for patients to specialist clinics
- Recording of immunisation on central registers
- Mandatory reporting of communicable diseases
- Clinical management of chronic disease across the health service population
- Medicare on-line billing
- Telehealth functions
- Maintaining clinical governance amongst staff
- CQI activities
- Reporting to funding bodies
- To a degree access to internet connections can also affect the ability to maintain staff in remote settings:
 - Link to family
 - Able to conduct personal business
- Currently AMSANT member health services deploy several communications technologies
 - BDSL
 - ADSL
 - Next G
 - Satellite
- The servicing and maintenance of telecommunications environments is challenging and expensive. Our members run health services on relatively lean budgets this means they rely on consumer grade telecommunication services
 - Difficult to find experienced contractors
 - Difficult to find experienced contractors who can respond quickly
 - The fact that these are consumer grade connections means that the corporate help desks do not respond quickly
- Quite often there is optic fibre to communities that our member services operate in but there is no consumer grade connection such as ADSL. Communications infrastructure upgrades do not consider the business model of organisations like Aboriginal community controlled health services.
 - Do not have budgets for commercial terrestrial connections
 - Do not have budgets for commercial satellite connections

How do you think telecommunications services can be used to improve health services in rural and regional areas?

- Internet portal reporting and eHealth functionality is now a key part of primary health care delivery. To meet future use of reporting and eHealth initiatives will require reliable internet services with a high QoS and low contention rates hitherto not found in remote settings on consumer grade connections.
- In the future technology will be able to deliver advances that will provide real benefits to the Aboriginal community controlled health services and facilitate quality improvements to our primary health care model. This includes:
 - The new Personally Controlled Electronic Health Record
 - Ochre Streams reporting and CQI

- New Medicare telehealth items
- Improved videoconferencing
- Advance electronic shared care planning
- Point of care testing
- Communications improvements are critical to enhancements to the current service delivery model. Without them it will preclude involvement with the advances that are coming in eHealth and Telehealth; advances that our members are ready for in all other aspects of their business.
- It is very difficult to get real information about the NBN. The marketing information suggests that it will bring about benefit but it is difficult to get technical and cost details that allow our members to make business decisions

Indigenous Communities - Questions to think about

Are you part of an Indigenous community? If so, what are your experiences with telecommunications services?

- For the most part our member services operate in indigenous communities

Have you got any ideas about how to improve telecommunications services for Indigenous Australians?

- It will require reliable internet services with a high QoS and low contention rates hitherto not found in remote settings on consumer grade connections.

Getting the Services We Want - Questions to think about

Have you had any problems using telecommunications services?

For example, have you ever made a complaint to a telecommunications company?

If so, we'd like to know about your experience.

- AMSANT members continually have difficulties with telecommunications services. Rural and remote consumer grade infrastructure is of poor quality. and

Was the problem resolved? Were you satisfied with the service you received?

- AMSANT member services are quite often hampered by connection failure that can last for as long as three months
 - This is more common for consumer grade satellite connections than terrestrial connections that tend to have better support models

Do you feel that there are any specific problems faced by people living in rural and remote areas? If so, what are these problems?

- Technical solutions to telecommunications problems that require a service visit are problematic due to issues of remoteness.
- The fact that most connections are consumer grade means that they are more prone to service difficulties and conversely not a high priority for resolution by providers.

Getting the Coverage We Want - Questions to think about

Do you use a mobile phone network or a satellite phone? We'd like to know about your experiences with either of these.

- All AMSANT member services use Next G connections for mobile phones and data connections.
- Connection is improving on the main highways but is limited on minor roads
- The Next G data connections are increasingly more contended
 - This leaves them functional for internet connection but not good enough for remote desktop applications or interactive services like VOIP
- All AMSANT member services use satellite phones for remote travel
- The service is expensive and takes some time to become comfortable with its use
 - Fills a critical emergency role

Do you have any ideas or opinions about mobile phone coverage or satellite services?

- In the absence of terrestrial connections rural and remote Australia requires reliable mobile and satellite internet services with a high QoS and low contention rates hitherto not found in remote settings on consumer grade connections.