

Why an Information Strategy?

Improving safety and quality, in any area of the health system, relies on relevant and reliable evidence. Ministers recognised the nexus between information and safety and quality improvement when they established the Commission, and asked it to undertake key work on national information.

National action requires a strategic and coordinated approach to the development and analysis of relevant information. Australia has many rich sources of health data. The task for the Commission is to:

- Use existing information to best advantage to inform policy directions and evaluate progress;
- Enhance available data where there are important gaps or inconsistencies;
- Support best practice among key practitioners, in terms of data quality, governance and management, analysis and constructive application of results.

The Information Strategy outlines the means by which the Commission will lead and coordinate national improvements to the evidence base for safety and quality.

What are the goals of the Information Strategy?

The Information Strategy aims to provide national leadership in the development, analysis and reporting of information that enhances the safety and quality of health care.

Information relevant to safety and quality can take many forms — for instance, information on adverse events to highlight priority areas for improvement, on clinical outcomes to inform practice improvement, on patterns of medication use to indicate adherence to best practice prescribing patterns. The Strategy embraces all these types of information and spans the spectrum of health care.

The Strategy sets out four high level goals:

1. Support quality improvement of specific areas of clinical practice and the implementation of evidence based practice
2. Improve safety and quality in health care through the better use of information by regulatory organisations and better availability of information to those affected by regulation
3. Support national and international benchmarking by developing summary information capable of monitoring Australia’s performance in safety and quality
4. Improve national information infrastructure.

A work program has been developed to achieve each of these four goals. Early consultation with stakeholders has confirmed the direction of the Strategy, and AHMAC’s National Health Information Management Principal Committee has adopted its main components into its strategic plan for 2007–08.

What will the Information Strategy achieve?

High priority projects already commencing illustrate what the Strategy will achieve:

- National indicators: Ministers requested that the Commission develop a public reporting capacity. While surveys of hospitals have been used in the past to attempt to estimate numbers of adverse events, it is important to develop a national monitoring system based on routinely collected data. This project will involve the careful development of and consultation on key high level indicators for public reporting purposes, across the spectrum of care. Regular statistical reports will then inform senior policy makers and the public whether or not Australia's performance is improving and identify areas where action is needed. (*IS Project 3.1*).
- Australian clinical quality registries: The Commission will develop and validate national operating standards for clinical quality registries. Such registries are usually created and governed by clinicians so as to be able to pool data on patterns of care and its outcomes, with the aim of improving their individual and collective clinical practice. This project will support these efforts by creating a model for best practice, including standards for governance, ethics, the use of national data standards, clinical use of information and technical design for key components of registries. The model will be tested and validated in consultation with the field, and via funding a small number of registries to test the standards by implementing them. (*IS Project 1.3*).
- Improving and sharing incident information: The first national sentinel events report, published in mid 2007, resulted from a request by Ministers that a national report be compiled on eight defined 'sentinel' events seen to be key events leading to patient harm. The resulting report was seen to be of limited utility. The Commission is developing options to discuss with stakeholders and to enable recommendations to be made about the next steps. Incident management is an area of active work across the country and at all levels of the health system, and these developments will be considered in planning the path forward. The work will result in decisions on how best to learn from the array of information being gathered on incidents and adverse events, and what national mechanisms for sharing information will add value to what already exists. (*IS Project 1.1*).
- Core maternity indicators: This project involves establishing and enabling the use of maternity indicators to improve the quality of maternity care. A draft set of indicators has been developed by a multi-disciplinary group, including obstetricians, midwives, general practitioners, experts in maternity policy, epidemiology, data definition, and consumers. The work was fostered in 2002 by health ministers and the first phase funded by the former Council. The next phase of the work will involve calculating and using the indicators to improve practice, as well as developing mechanisms to collect important missing information. (*IS Project 1.2*).
- National data sets and standards: Ministers asked the Commission to 'recommend national data sets for safety and quality, working within current multi-lateral governmental arrangements for data development, standards, collection and reporting'. This project creates a mechanism for this to happen. It will result in: a data inventory of existing sources; a framework or information model in which to map and assess information needs and information sources; modules of data standards developed in collaboration with expert groups specifying information needs and national health information committees. This work will enhance the completeness, quality and consistency of national data relevant to safety and quality. (*IS Project 4.1*).

As work on the Commission's other priority programs progresses—for instance in the area of accreditation—plans will be developed to support their information needs.

Further detail on all the projects of the Information Strategy can be found on the Commission's web site.

How will the Commission work on the Information Strategy?

The Commission's role is to lead and coordinate improvement to national safety and quality information. In doing so it will:

- Focus on practical priorities, ensuring that information meets a priority need, has a clear purpose and use;
- Build on what has been done, including using existing data where possible;
- Communicate and collaborate, including:
 - Feeding information back to those who have provided it and those who need to act on it
 - Forming strategic partnerships and appropriate advisory structures
 - Working with existing national structures for health information, including the National Health Information Management Principal Committee and related committees. The Australian institute of Health and Welfare will be a key partner on some projects.
- Ensure quality in information; and
- Generally coordinate and facilitate projects rather than carrying out work in-house.