

Smart health cards or health smart cards?

THERE IS PLENTY OF ACTIVITY throughout the world focusing on encrypting personal health (and other) information on credit card-sized plastic “smart” cards. These cards are embedded with a computer chip and could provide easy access to essential health information. As with many new technologies, there is debate about smart cards in health.

In July 2004 the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing at that time, the Hon Tony Abbott, announced that “Australians will have access to a new Medicare smart card as part of the government’s electronic health agenda to improve the quality and accessibility of patient information across the health system”.¹ This led to the introduction of the Health and Social Services smart card initiative. The business case for this initiative suggested that this card could replace around 17 government issued “health” cards, while improving proof of identify arrangements.² While in opposition, the Labor Party opposed the notion of the smart card, claiming it was an identity card by stealth,³ and at the time of writing, it appears that the health smart card has been put on the backburner while the Government sorts out the priorities.

In this issue, Mohd Rosli and his Melbourne colleagues report on a study of patient and staff perceptions about health smart cards (*page 136*). In this study, 270 emergency department patients and 92 staff completed self-administered questionnaires. The findings among patients and staff generally supported the introduction of smart cards with the majority reporting that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

The majority of the respondents indicated that the cards should be brought into use, and that they would use one if offered. However, the study did find that a large proportion of staff and patients were not aware of health smart cards at all. A fundamental change in the structure of our relationship with the government had been proposed through the Health and Social Services smart card initiative, and yet the findings of this study suggest that the Australian public was ill prepared to discuss the implications.

Where is the information sharing, the discussion and the debate that can help shape our health care system for the future?

In our last issue of 2008 we included a call for student papers. I would like to remind all readers of this important initiative, reproduced overleaf, as I believe this is an effective way to begin to encourage the necessary discussion and debate.

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- 1 Abbott T. New Medicare smart cards [media release]. 24 June 2004. Available at: <http://www.drinkingnightmare.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/health-mediarel-yr2004-ta-abb085.htm?OpenDocument&yr=2004&mth=6> (accessed Dec 2008).
- 2 KPMG. Department of Human Services Health and Social Services Smart Card Initiative. Volume 1: Business Case Public Extract. Commonwealth of Australia, 2006.
- 3 Ludwig J. Address to Smart Cards Summit [ministerial speech]. 11 June 2008. Available at: <http://www.mhs.gov.au/media/speeches/080611-Ministerial-address-smart-cards-summit.html> (accessed Dec 2008).

Australian Health Review



call for student papers

The Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association (AHHA) and the *Australian Health Review* (AHR) invite university students to submit a paper for consideration for the 2008 Student Paper Awards, comprising an undergraduate and a postgraduate award.

The purpose of these Awards is to support and encourage excellence in health policy and management research and writing at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Submissions will be accepted for consideration until 31 April 2009. The papers must meet the following criteria:

1. The primary author of a submitted paper must be an undergraduate or postgraduate student at an Australian or New Zealand university in 2008. Additional authors other than the primary author may include other undergraduate students and the faculty mentor or supervisor.
2. Only original papers (not published or accepted for publication elsewhere) will be accepted. (Oral or poster presentations with printed abstracts do not count as published papers.)
3. Papers should be 1000–3500 words and be prepared according to the guidelines for authors of *AHR*.

4. All entries require a sponsoring statement from a university supervisor who attests: (a) that the supervisor has read the manuscript and (b) that the planning, execution, and writing of the manuscript represent primarily the work of the student(s).

The papers will be reviewed by a sub-committee of the Editorial Board of *AHR*, using the following four criteria:

- Justification for the paper
- Subject mastery and originality
- Logical organisation
- Relevance to health policy and management in Australia and New Zealand.

The Award winning undergraduate and postgraduate papers will be published in Issue 33(4) of *AHR* and the authors will be recognised at the 2009 AHHA National Congress.

Other papers in this issue help us to consider new models of care, workforce issues and key findings in clinical service utilisation.