

2 June 2010

The Hon Tony Abbott MP  
Leader of the Opposition  
Parliament House  
Canberra

Business  
Council of  
Australia



Dear Mr Abbott

### **E-HEALTH**

Transforming the way in which patient and health system information is collected, stored and accessed is fundamental to meeting many challenges within the sector. Tackling this area offers perhaps the greatest potential for improving the productivity of the system, and therefore its performance for patients, than any other reform available to us at present.

This is why the Business Council of Australia is disappointed in your decision to oppose funding allocated to e-Health in the 2010-2011 Federal Budget, and the indications you will seek to amend and even delay the Healthcare Identifiers Bill. Both these microeconomic reforms are fundamental building blocks for infrastructure needed to address key health information challenges. The Bill will allow for the first time for a national database of unique identifiers for patients and providers. While it must have adequate provisions for privacy and security, it must also be seen as urgent. Without it, the whole national infrastructure for e-Health is jeopardised. The e-Health funding will pay for the development of a an electronic patient record that can be rolled out nationally for voluntary take-up by patients, thereby eliminating the need for paper records, duplication and patients being responsible for ensuring all providers are aware of their medical history.

Most advocates for health improvement agree transforming information management in the sector will have two key benefits. It will be pivotal to improving the efficiency and productivity of the sector, for example relieving over-worked health professionals who spend too much time looking for the right information or missing the appropriate supplies they need to do their job. While we recognise that budget savings need to be made, in our view, the cutting of funding for e-health represents a false economy.

But importantly, there are the life-saving benefits by improving the safety of patients. Every year patients are harmed and die because of errors caused by poor communication, misidentification of patients or body parts, and gaps in information as diagnoses and treatments begin.

In other sectors, preventable deaths and injuries are considered unacceptable. For example, we have not accepted a high road toll, which has been cut by two-thirds in the years since 1995. We do not accept it when unsafe goods are put on sale. We ensure they are quickly recalled and banned from sale. We do not believe any level

of workplace injury or death is acceptable, with new rules and laws regulating workplace safety and imposing penalties on those who pursue unsafe practices. And we should not accept preventable deaths and injury in our health care system.

As long ago as 1995 it was estimated that up to 2 per cent of people entering hospital either die or suffer serious injury because of adverse events. We cannot estimate how many are being harmed in the healthcare system outside hospitals because the information is not collected. The National Quality and Safety Commission for Healthcare has made it clear that the number of preventable deaths and injuries would be significantly reduced if we had more accurate, fuller and shared information systems.

Australia is not alone in having these problems. Where we are different is the lack of political agreement to resolve the problem. As Dr Richard Ashby, Executive Director, and Executive Director, Medical Services, Princess Alexandra Hospital has said: "No-one has died from a breach of privacy by accessing their medical records, but 3000 people each year are dying because medical staff do not have the correct information about patients."

All the major stakeholders agree on the necessary steps. The public has been surveyed on electronic health records many times and they always support it. Doctors support it, and those who have invested in systems in anticipation of a nationally integrated system are frustrated with the delays. Patients support it, as they move endlessly among providers repeating their stories; undergoing unnecessary tests and wasting time.

The Business Council of Australia urges you to support the Healthcare Identifiers Bill and the investments to national infrastructure for e-health.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katie Lahey', written in a cursive style.

**Katie Lahey**