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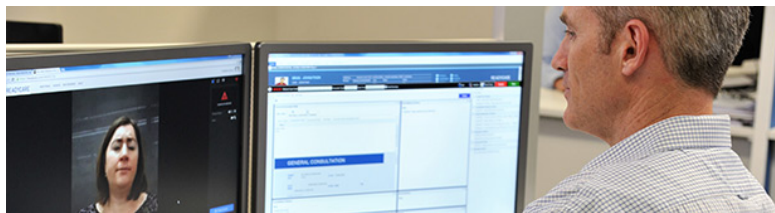
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Telstra's huge play in eHealth

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By Health View

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Sophisticated medical care available in the comfort of home has long been a staple of science fiction. Telstra has now invested \$237 million in making it a reality.

"You can compare what we're aiming to do with what happened in the banking industry," says Sarah Abbott, General Manager Business and Strategy at Telstra Health. "While it used to be considered normal to travel to a bank branch during business hours to access money, we've moved on from that. Likewise, things are evolving away from people having to travel to their GP's office, at a time that suits the GP, to access the medical care they need."

Telstra has partnered with 17 companies operating in or around the healthcare industry and is rolling out numerous eHealth initiatives, with the ambition of establishing itself as Australia's leading eHealth provider. These ambitions stretch from expanding FRED, Australia's first and largest national electronic prescription exchange service, which already connects over 20,000 doctors and pharmacies, to bankrolling Emerging Systems, which is pioneering the cloud-enabled clinical information systems being increasingly embraced by major Australian healthcare providers. But perhaps the two initiatives set to have the most immediate impact are MyCareManager and ReadyCare.

Around the clock medical care

MyCareManager is an eHealth solution aimed at the aged, community care and disability sectors. It's structured around a telehealth monitoring platform and a self-service portal.

"We've partnered with Silverchain, an innovative provider of community care, to roll it out," says Abbott. "Instead of having to send a nurse out to someone's home to make sure they swallow a tablet, that can now be done via video-conferencing."

ReadyCare is being marketed as 'a doc around the clock'. People ring up and get put through to a GP, employed by Telstra Health, for a telephone or video-conferencing consultation. Telstra Health joined forces with Medgate, a Swiss provider of outpatient healthcare, to launch the service. Medgate's Gianin Zogg was appointed ReadyCare CEO.

"Medgate has been offering this kind of service in Switzerland for 15 years and subsequently elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East," Zogg says. "That's four million consultations by video and phone and not a single legal case. We've developed good systems and are excited to have a strong local partner to help us adapt those systems to Australian conditions."

Of course, there have been previous bursts of enthusiasm for telemedicine that haven't amounted to much. But Abbott believes a double whammy of technological innovation and ballooning healthcare costs means change is now inevitable.

"Yes, telephones and even video-conferencing have been around for a long time without having much impact. But now, for example, there are the platforms for patients to transmit diagnostic information to their GP, which means that a face-to-face examination may not be required. Also, with an ageing population, rising incidence of chronic disease and constrained funding environment something is going to have to give."

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Bringing eHealth to remote communities

The Northern Territory government didn't hesitate to sign up for the services offered by Telstra Health.

"The potential is there, through eHealth, to allow Australians in rural and remote areas to receive the same quality of healthcare as those living in major urban centres," says Abbott. "We're excited to be working with the Northern Territory government and various Aboriginal medical services, to make telehealth available to some of Australia's most isolated communities from some of its leading hospitals."

While industry disruption often results in cheaper, more convenient services for consumers, for workers change tends to be a mixed blessing. Abbott and Zogg are quick to emphasise they're keen to work and collaborate with medical professionals.

"We're currently looking into how we can partner with GPs," says Zogg. "The potential is there for doctors to, for example, license our intellectual property. They could make use of the IT, clinical guidelines and triage and patient management systems we've developed to conduct phone or video consultations."

"It's not a matter of eHealth replacing everything that's gone before," adds Abbott. "There will still be hospitals and GP clinics and many situations where face-to-face treatment is appropriate. What eHealth can do is allow consumers to access services more conveniently and facilitate providers delivering care more efficiently. Telstra Health is focusing on creating the solutions that benefit both healthcare consumers and providers and which help address the big challenges the sector is facing."

Key takeouts

Telstra has invested \$237 million and partnered with 17 healthcare companies to roll out numerous eHealth initiatives, with the ambition of establishing itself as Australia's leading eHealth provider.

- The two initiatives set to have the most immediate impact are MyCareManager and ReadyCare.
- MyCareManager is an eHealth solution aimed at the aged, community care and disability sectors. Telstra's partnered with community care provider Silverchain to bring it to market.
- ReadyCare has people put through to a GP, employed by Telstra Health, for a telephone or video-conferencing consultation. Telstra Health joined forces with Medgate, a Swiss provider of outpatient healthcare, to launch the service.
- Telstra is working with the Northern Territory government and various Aboriginal medical services, to make telehealth available to some of Australia's most isolated communities from some of its leading hospitals.

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