



# How PHNs Integrate Health Services

## Frequently Asked Questions

Integrating health services to improve the way the health system functions at the local level is a core function of Primary Health Networks (PHNs).

### What does integration of care mean?

A patient's journey through the health system often involves accessing a number of different services either within the community or through a hospital or clinic. These services may not easily connect with each other because they may be funded by different levels of government or non-government organisations, have limited data sharing ability, or they may not realise the benefits in communicating and working collaboratively.

Integration of care is designed to overcome the challenges of navigating Australia's often fragmented health system. It is a partnership that brings together different health providers and state and territory-based Local Hospital Networks (or their equivalent) to create a more holistic system of care and support that:

- is centred on the needs of the patient
- is effective and efficient
- matches the health needs of the community
- makes best use of health funding.

### Why is this important?

Poorly integrated or coordinated services can compromise the quality of care for patients and increase the frequency of avoidable hospitalisations, emergency department visits, and medication errors.

Integrating health services can address these issues and helps empower patients to take greater control over their own health and wellbeing. It also means that patients are more likely to receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

There are several benefits to an integrated care approach.

Integrated or coordinated care may result in a better experience for the patient, and leads to improved patient pathways and health outcomes. It also improves the efficiency of the health system by making the best possible use of health funding and available resources, and avoids duplication of services.

An integrated approach encourages greater collaboration between health professionals, service providers and Local Hospital Networks (or their equivalent).

Integrated care improves the recording and sharing of patient information, giving health professionals a more comprehensive view of their patient's health. This makes it easier to identify more appropriate health services and treatments for the patient.

## How do PHNs approach the integration of health services?

PHNs act as local agents of change in Australia's health system. They partner with clinicians, state and territory-based Local Hospital Networks (or their equivalent), local governments, non-government organisations and communities to improve health outcomes by making the patient experience as smooth as possible.

This process may involve:

- reducing service gaps and duplication
- engaging clinicians as enablers of change
- encouraging a multidisciplinary approach to patient care
- improving the health literacy of patients and the wider community.

The approach taken by PHNs to service integration will vary between regions due to the differences in regional health infrastructure and services.

## What is the role of digital health and information sharing in service integration?

Digital health is an important component of health service integration and can be used to inform the development of better quality health services.

Digital health makes it easier to communicate, integrate, and appropriately share information. PHNs are particularly involved with activities such as supporting health care providers to set up and use their unique health care identifier number in their practice software and other systems, the expansion of the Australian Government's My Health Record, and analysis of general practice data. Work is also underway to improve secure messaging, and many PHNs are using telehealth or care at a distance.

Improving patients' experience of care, their outcomes, and cost effectiveness are common aims of health improvement. These aims apply equally to digital health. Patients and clinicians all need timely information, such as health summaries, discharge summaries, medications, and test results. Better communication between health professionals and services is vital to improving health outcomes for patients and improving their experiences when navigating the health system. It reduces confusion, delays in service delivery and health care costs, and improves safety.

Digital health programs are intended to:

- better coordinate care and better inform treatment decisions, prevent adverse drug events, reduce medical errors, and improve vaccination rates
- promote a more efficient health system by reducing avoidable hospitalisations and test duplication which increase the cost of health care, and minimising time spent searching for patient data
- improve health care availability and increase opportunities to engage patients in their health care and decisions about treatment
- provide greater access to health care for people living in rural and remote areas of Australia
- improve options for accessing care, such as through remote communication
- better understand health needs through analysis of data collected from different sources.