



Australian Library and  
Information Association



AUSTRALIAN  
PUBLIC LIBRARY  
ALLIANCE

## **ALIA submission in response to the Australian Digital Health Agency consultation: National Digital Health Strategy Framework for Action**

**6 April 2018**

### **1. About us**

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation and peak body for the Australian library and information services sector.

On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support. We represent school, public, academic, research, corporate, law, health, government, National, State and Territory libraries and the people who staff them.

#### **Health libraries**

It is estimated there are between 350 and 400 health libraries in Australia, including hospital, community health, government department, research institute, university, public health, pharmaceutical and biotechnology libraries<sup>1</sup>. There are some 1,250 people employed in these libraries; 760 health librarians, 290 library technicians and 200 general staff. Health librarians are an important part of the health information workforce, alongside health information managers and health informaticians. The health information workforce will be an important asset in the roll out of the National Digital Health Strategy.

The health sector within ALIA is represented by ALIA Health Libraries Australia.

#### **Public libraries**

Australia has more than 1500 central, branch and mobile libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and more than 113 million customer visits each year. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, wifi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, they are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource. Families with young children are an important audience and there are some 121,000 storytimes held each year, with more than 3.1 million participants.

The public library sector within ALIA is represented by the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Kammermann, M. 2016. The Census of Australian Health Libraries and Health Librarians Working Outside the Traditional Library Setting: The Final Report.

## 2. Libraries and the National Digital Health Strategy

The success of the National Digital Health Strategy relies on a number of factors which can be aided by the library and information sector:

- Public participation in the My Health Record system, which requires a digitally enabled population, equity of access, awareness and trust
- High quality information that is easily accessible for the public and to health care providers which requires health literate consumers as well as organisations that demonstrate attributes of 'health literate organisations'<sup>2</sup>.
- Digital health skills and knowledge of evidence-based practice for health professionals and health sciences students.

## 3. Public participation in the My Health Record system

### NDHS priority action 1.1.1 Deliver opt-out participant arrangements nationally for the My Health Record system

Libraries provide a valuable platform for government communication and public education initiatives. They are trusted places, promoting equity and freedom of access to information and resources.

Health libraries – particularly those sited in hospitals and health centres – are ideally placed to provide information to health staff about the My Health Record system and the National Digital Health Strategy. In addition, health libraries often lead or co-sponsor digital, e-health and consumer health literacy programs for patients, health consumer and carer groups in their health services. These existing links with healthcare consumers and healthcare professionals make health libraries a reliable and effective partner for informing key players in the transition to digital healthcare.

Public libraries can play an important role in communicating the National Digital Health Strategy and My Health Record to the wider Australian community. Through our network of public libraries, we have more than 1600 "shop windows" in communities across metro, regional and remote parts of Australia.

Public libraries are often the conduit between the public and government websites and information. Each year, public libraries are dealing with more and more enquiries. In 2015-2016<sup>3</sup>, more than 8.3 million reference transactions and information requests were recorded. The majority of these enquiries related to government information.

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<sup>2</sup> Ref: Brach C, Keller D, Hernandez LM, Baur C, Parker R, Dreyer B, Schyve P, Lemerise AJ and Schillinger D\*. (2012) Ten Attributes of Health Literate Health Care Organizations. June 2012 \*Participants in the activities of the IOM Roundtable on Health Literacy <http://www.who.int/global-coordination-mechanism/activities/working-groups/Ten-Health-Literacy-Attributes.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nsla.org.au/publication/australian-public-libraries-statistics-2015-2016>

Public libraries can be a major asset to Departments adopting a stronger digital presence, if given advance notice and engaged in early discussions; without this, we are unable to provide the information and reassurance library users seek.

**Recommendation 1:** Enter into discussions with ALIA Health Libraries Australia and the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance about a funded communications plan for the National Digital Health Strategy which explicitly articulates the roles of health and public libraries and allows for factsheets, FAQs and handouts to be provided well in advance of any public-facing campaign. Note the need for materials in a variety of community languages.

### **NDHS priority action 7.1, promote inclusiveness and equality of experience**

According to 2015 figures from Telstra<sup>4</sup>, one in five Australians was not online; four in 10 of the lowest income households in Australia were not connected to the internet, and of people aged 65 or more, only 46% were internet users. While these figures have improved, it still means that a significant proportion of the population is digitally excluded.

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind, particularly in terms of the ability to access government information.

Public libraries provide:

- Support for safe online experiences
- High speed broadband internet connection in a safe, friendly community space.
- PC terminals, tablets and other devices (including technology petting zoos)<sup>5</sup>
- Spaces for exploring innovative digital technologies
- Training and informal help for people to develop digital literacy skills
- Relevant and engaging content.

On behalf of libraries, ALIA became one of the first members of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance when it launched in August 2017.

The Australian Government has recognised the challenges of equity of access to information and services delivered online, and efforts are being made through libraries to address disadvantage and target groups who are less likely to be digitally engaged. Two examples are:

*Be Connected is a substantial initiative designed to promote digital literacy for older Australians. ALIA is working with the Department of Social Services, the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, the Be Connected National Network*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-index-report/the-discussion-paper/>

<sup>5</sup> Australia's 1486 central, branch and mobile libraries (2015-2016 figures) provide 12,806 devices with internet connection.

*Manager (the Good Things Foundation), and libraries across Australia to support digital inclusion programs in local communities.*

*The State Library of Queensland has introduced the Deadly Digital Communities program. The program provides community-based digital literacy and technology training over two years to 26 remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland. Participants will learn digital skills from sending an email, to using social media, to paying bills online, to promoting a new business idea and more.*

The first Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) was released in 2016, as a joint venture between Telstra, RMIT University and the Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne, powered by Roy Morgan Research (ALIA has a place on the Research Advisory Committee). The ADII identified the barriers to digital inclusion and the impact on communities.

As described in the ADII 2017<sup>6</sup>, digital inclusion in Australia is growing, but gaps between digitally included and excluded Australians are substantial and widening. The ACT has the highest ADII score at 59.9, while Tasmania has the lowest at 49.7.

**Recommendation 2:** There is no need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to “gaining a better understanding of the barriers to digital inclusion” and delivering “programs which improve digital literacy and ensure inclusiveness.” Instead, partner with health and public libraries and other organisations that are already actively involved in addressing this issue.

**Recommendation 3:** The National Digital Health Strategy will benefit from the digital inclusion initiatives already itemised, and should also address accessibility of websites and health information for people with print disabilities. This is in line with the Marrakesh Treaty (also known as the Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works by Visually Impaired Persons and Persons with Print Disabilities), which was signed by Australia in 2014.

## **4. High quality information**

### **NDHS priority action 3.3, promote data quality**

Library and information professionals in the health sector possess the skills to manage data that fall outside the scope of patient records - for example clinical research data, systematic review data, technical systems specification data, administrative performance reporting data, historical data.

A critical factor in making data discoverable and usable is for there to be quality metadata in place. This is a core skill of library and information professionals working in the health sector.

**Recommendation 4:** Deploy health library and information professionals routinely throughout the health sector - in healthcare provider organisations, health information service providers,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>

and health research institutes and health administration agencies - to help promote and improve data quality management particularly of data that fall outside the scope of patient records - for example clinical research data, systematic review data, technical systems specification data, administrative performance reporting data, historical data.

## **5. Digital health skills for health professionals**

**NDHS priority action 6.1.1, supporting the workforce to confidently use digital technologies;  
6.1.2, development of digital health national educational curricula and training materials;  
6.1.3 integration of digital health in national standards and accreditation requirements**

Clinicians (including doctors, nurses, and allied health practitioners) and other health services staff, whether in clinical, research, education, management or support roles, rely on health librarians for quality information. A national survey of library users in 2012 found that for 83% of respondents, library services had helped improve health outcomes for patients, and for 76%, the information provided had changed their thinking and improved their diagnosis or treatment plan. Further, health librarians are skilled at empowering their clients to better inform themselves. They develop guides to useful resources, conduct information literacy programs, and help library users improve their competencies in working with information online. Finally, health librarians are expert at identifying and overcoming the limitations of many of the commercially available information / knowledge databases that are marketed to clinicians.

ALIA accredits library and information professionals at higher education and Diploma levels and the use of digital technologies is a fundamental aspect of all approved courses. We also offer a professional development specialisation for health librarians, based on a set of eight competencies:

1. Understand the health sciences and health care environment and the policies, issues and trends that impact on that environment.
2. Understand the principles and practices related to providing information services to meet users' needs.
3. Understand the management of health information resources in a broad range of formats.
4. Know and understand the application of leadership, finance, communication, and management theory and techniques.
5. Understand and use technology and systems to manage all forms of information.
6. Understand curricular design and instruction, and have the ability to teach ways to access, organise and use information.
7. Understand scientific research methods and have the ability to critically examine and filter research literature from many related disciplines.
8. Maintain currency of professional knowledge and practice.

**Recommendation 5:** Recognise the professional contribution of health librarians in supporting the development of national standards and accreditation. Exploit the potential of health libraries to promote the safe, effective and wise use of digital information and communication technologies by health practitioners.

## 6. Summary of recommendations

We ask for the role of libraries as supporters, facilitators and advocates for the National Digital Health Strategy to be articulated and acknowledged, opening the way for active partnerships with government to progress the agenda.

**Recommendation 1:** Enter into discussions with the ALIA Health Libraries Australia and the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance about a funded communications plan for the National Digital Health Strategy.

**Recommendation 2:** Don't reinvent the wheel. Instead, partner with libraries and other organisations that are already actively involved in addressing digital inclusion.

**Recommendation 3:** The National Digital Health Strategy should address accessibility of websites and health information for people with print disabilities.

**Recommendation 4:** Deploy health library and information professionals routinely throughout the health sector to help improve data quality.

**Recommendation 5:** Recognise and acknowledge the professional status of health library and information staff and exploit the potential of health libraries to promote the safe, effective and wise use of digital information and communication technologies by health practitioners.

ALIA, ALIA Health Libraries Australia and the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance would welcome the opportunity to engage in discussions with the Australian Digital Health Agency about the points raised in this submission.

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