

Coalition's stance on IT has serious consequences

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Fiscal conservatism ranks high as a political virtue in this election campaign, but sometimes it can be taken to extremes. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the Coalition's approach to IT, which seems destined to drag Australia back into the dark ages. Ever willing to forego previous commitments and forget previous statements, the Opposition has scrapped the National Broadband Network and put something in its place that not even it can explain. The Coalition will abandon the school computer program and not proceed with e-health projects. While all these so-called policies are done under the rubric of saving money, this is a short-term gesture that may well have some long-term and unforeseen costs.

That is certainly the case for e-health. While there is no doubt that much money has been wasted on e-health initiatives over the years, with frustrating slow progress towards implementation, Tony Abbott seems to have conveniently forgotten that much of the extravagance and delay took place on his watch as health minister in the Howard Government. Since its establishment in 2005, the National E-Health Transition Authority has chewed through around \$360million and has struggled to meet deadlines to deliver the unique patient and provider identifiers and agreed medical terminology that are needed for a national e-health system.

But that work is now mostly complete, and the health-care identifiers legislation has been enacted, thus undermining the arguments made by shadow treasurer Joe Hockey to justify his Budget response, which took the \$467million committed to further implementation of e-health records as savings. Hockey's self-identified strong line on investment in IT would apparently have Australians back using paper and fax rather than software and the internet, and fails to recognise how critical IT is to business, education and health, especially in a country the size of Australia. It is certainly a key aspect of health care reform. Investments in e-health will deliver huge savings in dollars and lives.

A report released last May by [Booz & Company](#) reveals that Government investment in a comprehensive e-health system could generate more than \$7.6billion in annual health-care savings by 2020, mostly by avoiding errors in medication, and prevent an estimated 5000 deaths, two million primary care and outpatient visits, 500,000 emergency department visits and 310,000 hospital admissions each year. In Britain, Sir Derek Wanless's review of the Blair health reforms found that better use of information and communication technology was the key to delivering productivity and health gains, and he recommended spending 4percent of the health budget on IT. In the United States, the Obama Administration included \$36billion in the stimulus bill for health IT, including \$1.2billion for the roll-out of e-health records. The administration estimates that this will eventually yield some \$17billion in savings through improved safety and efficiency.

Health IT investments in telemedicine are arguably also essential. Telemedicine can improve access to care for patients and access to specialist advice for general practitioners, integrate care across multiple sites, save on patient travel, minimise duplicative testing, and contribute to health literacy. There was a time when Abbott

recognised this. In the first scripted speech he made as health minister, he spoke of the importance of creating an e-health system, describing it as a "self-evident worthy goal". Later in his tenure, he described e-health as "the most important practical measure policy-makers can pursue to make [the health system] more efficient and more responsive to patients" and as something that was "good for doctors and good for patients as well as good for taxpayers". Abbott went on to say that he saw an e-health record system as necessary to ensure the "continued excellence of Australia's health system" and noted that even savings as small as 1per cent would liberate \$800million every year that could be deployed towards better health outcomes. Now he says that an Abbott government will defer spending on e-health records until the budget is back in surplus. This major policy backflip fails to recognise that 96per cent of Australians are in favour of e-health records, and that investments in health IT will deliver benefits to all Australians and make a substantial contribution to the economic health of the nation.

Dr Lesley Russell is the Menzies Foundation Fellow at the **Menzies Centre for Health Policy**, University of Sydney / Australian National University. She is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington DC.