

Capital Health Network

HealthPathways website evaluation focus groups

Summary of findings

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AUSTRALIA | NEW ZEALAND | SINGAPORE | KENYA | USA

Summary

The HealthPathways (HPs) website has been running since 2015 and has seen a recent rise in usage. The project has reached maturity and external stakeholders see it as a tool to support broader system change. The role of HPs in creating system change is intertwined with wider system improvements. This makes it difficult to measure its impact and value as system change cannot often be solely attributed to the program.

This project sought to undertake an initial phase of evaluation to better understand healthcare provider perspectives on:

- HPs' role in supporting improved patient care
- HPs' role in supporting referral processes
- Opportunities for HPs in supporting a future health system

We engaged 19 people in three focus groups, including GPs, Allied Health Professionals, Nurses and other health professionals. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 2 NSW General Practice Liaison Officers and 4 specialists to gain a broad picture of HealthPathways' role and use.

In summary, we found that:

1. **When it's used, it's liked.** Not all people we spoke to had used HealthPathways. Those who had, were generally positive about it and what it could do. Positive comments were that it was informative, the pathways were clear, and it was helpful for people new to a region to understand the landscape and options.
2. **Its purpose was not clear.** People were not clear on exactly what it could and should be doing, and there was a great deal of conversation about health systems in general not linking up, rather than any single system being at fault. With a lack of clarity on purpose, people were unsure how to evaluate whether it was performing well. There were also misperceptions of what it should be doing, such as management of patient information or secure messaging. Clarity of purpose and its

relationship with practice systems, My Health Record, My Aged care and other sites such as ACT Health and GPHealthNet, would help people to use HealthPathways more effectively.

3. **There could be some usability improvements made.** People were unclear how to update listings or contribute to HealthPathways. One method is to use the feedback button, but this was not intuitive for people where they were wanting to update a listing, for example. While the interface may not be able to be changed, there could be benefit in education of users.
4. **Opportunity for better communication and care.** We heard that there may be a greater role for HealthPathways not just to help people along a primary to tertiary care pathway, but also in bringing them back to primary care or better utilisation of other options such as Allied Health. This could be through pathways and visibility from tertiary care users of care options in a region.
5. **Opportunity to balance healthcare regional load.** We heard from participants that referrals are often through personal relationships or 'known' providers, because practitioners want to trust where they are sending people for their care. This may mean that patients are sent to similar places and new or 'unknown' options are not effectively utilised in a region. For example, this is likely to affect regional providers where people may be used to referring into the ACT for specialists. There is great potential in HealthPathways being a tool that can help balance load across a region by highlighting regional-to-regional options for care, instead of just regional-to-metro options.

The landscape of health systems

HealthPathways is a digital support tool that operates within a landscape of digital health tools. When discussing whether it is working well, we found that it was difficult for people to differentiate between the many digital systems they use and each system's role, as well as a broader 'health system' landscape of roles and functions. This made any evaluation of HealthPathways difficult because a single task may draw on many systems, and rely on the interconnectedness of the systems.

Most health practitioners have and use:

- A 'main' system that they use to manage patient care, perhaps practice software or hospital systems
- Many sources for clinical guidance that they draw on, often through subscriptions
- Broader national systems, such as My Health Record and My Aged Care
- Occasionally, messaging and referral systems, and/or a fax

When assessing HealthPathways on 'care' for example, health professionals would consider the broader task of how well it works with other sources they use. This is even more complicated for considering 'referrals' because they are thinking about how to get patient information across systems, referral requirements, and concerns about wait times and whether a referral was successfully acted upon at the receiving end.

This means that assessment of HealthPathways is in the context of the health system landscape, where deficiencies are often not specific to HealthPathways, but to all health systems. We found common themes that were front of mind for participants when thinking about effective support for care and referrals.

Lack of systems interoperability

The systems used by healthcare providers rarely talk to each other which results in the use of manual workarounds (e.g. copy and paste) to share information across patient records. This has a negative impact on the timeliness and efficiency of patient care and treatment by taking time away

from patient care. This is a big problem between health systems and not specifically the remit of HealthPathways, however it may be eased through use of time savers such as smart referral forms with pre-fill features.

Lack of service availability

While HealthPathways can help healthcare professionals find the right referral pathways, the availability of services to deliver care is limited especially in regional areas. Local capacity is also an issue during times of high demand (e.g. during the bushfire crisis). Specialists can support GPs to manage chronic conditions e.g. diabetes care, in primary care settings by upskilling GPs through education sessions, telehealth consultations and support via phone/email. When there is only one referral pathway option, HealthPathways could better support providers to find alternative or interim care options for their patients, however there is an underlying dependency on having viable service options available.

Lack of effective secure and trusted messaging

Despite advances in communication technology, the health system still overly relies on fax for referrals and other sensitive communication. Participants raised instances of trying to use digital messaging platforms, but with limited uptake, and no clear single messaging system, participants would often also fax to be sure the message gets through.

Many messaging systems also provide a received notification, but this would be a system receipt (i.e. the message transmitted ok) rather than a meaningful confirmation that the message was delivered (i.e. the message has been seen by a human and acted upon). This lack of meaningful receipt means that patients may not be successfully referred, and there is either a need to follow up every message (negating its value) or to wait until the patient presents next and ask if they had been seen. In short, digital messaging is not yet trusted or effective in delivering any real value. There may be a role for HealthPathways to expand into this space, supporting effective messaging, referral and triage.

Comments

HealthPathways is great for general information

I know a lot of health professionals who use it, especially registrars who are new to the ACT

I first started using HealthPathways when I moved to Canberra, now I use it almost everyday - GP

I love the white space and navigation, it's not busy and has good functionality

I used HealthPathways to study for my exams when I needed to learn about all the referral pathways – Practice nurse and Midwife

The stuff on there is very interesting when you have the time to go through it

It's a great resource when you're new to Canberra and you don't know anything about how things work here

I find the public health alert information on HealthPathways very useful – GPLO

I have seen an improvement in referral quality as a result of the antenatal checklist on HPs – Specialist

The dropdown menus are great, it's not clunky and there's a lot of information you can access

Findings – what we heard

Navigating the referral systems

There are different referral requirements for each specialist which are not always available or kept updated on the systems or websites used by healthcare providers. HealthPathways may be able to assist in being a place that is easy for specialists to update what they require, to allow more efficient referrals.

Follow-up process for referrals

Following up on referrals can be a complex process and it is often left to the patient to manage. There is often no notification to confirm the receipt of a referral. Fax referrals may be overlooked or go missing. HealthPathways may be able to play a role in more effective messaging and digital referral.

Clarity on how the pathways were created

It wasn't clear to participants that HealthPathways involves GPs and co-creates local referral pathways and clinical resources. HealthPathways could focus on raising awareness of how to get involved with its ongoing development and also promote the fact that it is informed by local health professionals.

Capturing additional (live) information

Providers want access to certain information which is not currently provided such as:

- which clinics will accept bulk billing patients (as some bulk bill discretionally);
- which services have capacity and are accepting referrals;
- information on wait times for different services;
- recommended interim options where wait times are long; and
- more clarity about costs, funding and subsidies available for patients.

HealthPathways may be able to answer some of this information. It may be necessary to explore what is acceptable for some specialists and what level of information they are comfortable sharing publicly.

Currency of information / ability to change information

HealthPathways sometimes has out of date information about services. Information about new services is not regularly updated. This may be because it is difficult to find how to update a listing or other information, which is accessed through the 'Feedback' button. This is unintuitive for people and may be a cause of information being out of date. Healthcare professionals viewed the lack of current and relevant information to be a source of mistrust in the data available on the system. HealthPathways should explore options to change the button or guidance to make it clear how to update a listing.

Lack of clear identity

HealthPathways lacks a clear and distinguished identity to set itself apart from other systems. It is not consistently referred to by other sources in the region, such as the ACT Health website, Smartforms or other systems. There is no clear understanding of its role, strengths and features. It is also unclear who the target users for HealthPathways are. There is an opportunity to broaden the user base to better target specialists, junior medical officers, registrars and Allied Health professionals, which would round out the options available in a region as well as encourage greater frequency of updates to the information on the system.

Risks for future success of HealthPathways

Lack of integration with other tools across the system, lack of communication between primary and tertiary care practitioners, poor awareness and utilisation by GPs and allied health professionals, and lack of funding commitment from project partners.

Themes

What do healthcare professional see as the role of HealthPathways?

CURRENT
STATE

FUTURE
POTENTIAL

1

Holistic support system

HealthPathways provides good support for some pathways, highlighting local options where they exist and basic advice on care.

HealthPathways supports better end to end journey of care for patients where information flows seamlessly and in a timely manner across all healthcare providers. The benefits of this include enabling better interim patient care when wait times are long, improving follow up care in the primary care setting and by improving the patient's ability to make informed choices by understanding the full range of services available to them.

2

An evolving system for user needs

HealthPathways has a library of information, but it can take time to sieve through information to find meaningful content. This means it is not sought out as the primary system to support care and referral tasks.

HealthPathways is an evolving and adaptive system that responds to meet the changing needs of its users by tracking the needs and activities that matter most to healthcare professionals and creating ongoing feedback loops. For example: In the future, HealthPathways may be able to prompt users of new and relevant information and also filter information according the tasks or role of the user.

3

Distinguished identity and purpose

There is some awareness of HealthPathways and where it has been used, it has provided a positive experience. There is some confusion about its role in relation to other systems

HealthPathways needs to establish a clear identity in the health eco-system and establish its value proposition for users.

HealthPathways needs to be endorsed as the primary tool for communication and dissemination of information. For example: Clarify the purpose of HealthPathways on Smartforms and other systems (ACT website) as a tool for both clinical and referral information.

4

Technical innovation

HealthPathways is accessible to users via program partner websites and TopBar (clinical decision support system) which uses pre-authenticated links.

There is opportunity for technical innovation to meet the needs of healthcare professionals. This includes a dashboard for users which integrates software for patient referral and management.

Link e-referrals systems to relevant section on HP. Better integration of tools across hospitals and general practices. Use tick box on Smartforms to track if GPs are using HealthPathways for referral information

Future state vision – ideas we heard

Opportunities for HealthPathways to support the future health system

Better management of wait times

- Acknowledging that everyone wants shorter wait times and we need to better use Allied Health during the interim period.
- Having more visibility over rough wait times (eg. years or weeks) would help improve patient care

Increasing traffic and meaningful interaction with HealthPathways

- Monitoring and tracking of HealthPathways eg. number of clicks, site and page traffic, usability etc.
- Engaging users to provide feedback on the system

Becoming an information hub

- People will go to HealthPathways for up to date data and will also be able to contribute to keeping data relevant and current
- Information about services and contact details are kept up to date
- Users are notified when new information is available (eg. addition of new services or changes to service information)

Strengthening connections across spectrum of services

- Engaging the broader healthcare community (ie. not just for GPs)
- Raising awareness for new services that enter the market
- Database to find specialised primary and Allied Health providers
- Support understanding of and learn from metro and regional contexts

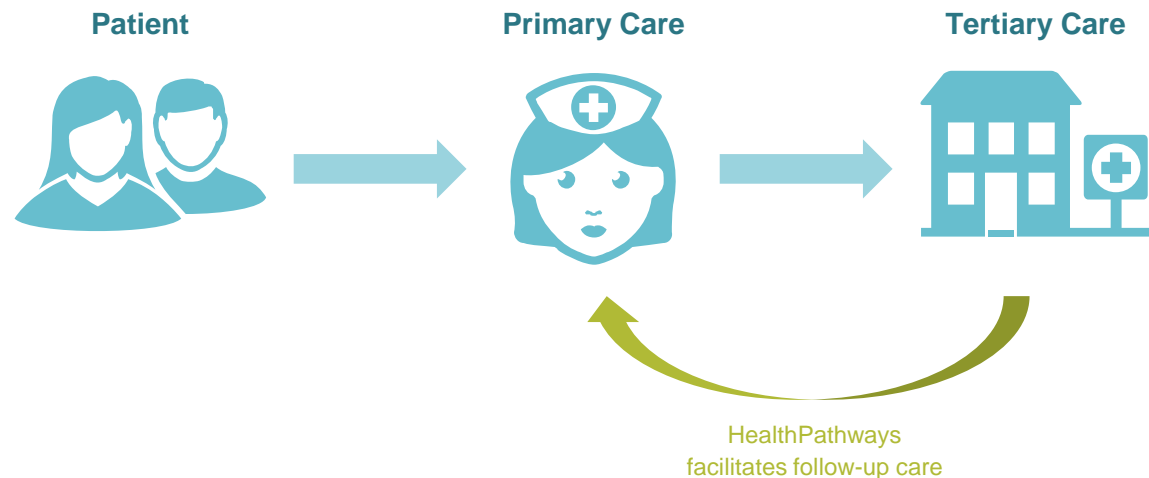
A role in supporting holistic care

Opportunity to help loop back to primary care / communication

HealthPathways works well in supporting primary healthcare providers to navigate referral pathways into tertiary care.

However, there may be further opportunity to support tertiary care providers to refer patients back into the primary healthcare system for follow up and ongoing care.

This could improve and strengthen relationships, networks and service linkages between primary and tertiary to form a holistic system of patient care.



A role as a balancer of health services across a wide geographic region

There is great potential in HealthPathways being a tool that can help balance load across the regions and deliver care efficiently

Although HealthPathways has a directory for services and referral criteria, some of this information was reported to be out of date. The site is also not regularly updated with information about new services and is unable to provide information about which services are accepting new referrals.

This means there is a tendency for primary care providers to re-use known health services which are often in high demand, rather than better utilising new services or ones that have more capacity to take in new referrals with shorter or no waiting times.

As HealthPathways is designed to highlight referral and service options to healthcare providers, it has the potential to balance out the load and demand on health services. Investment in the design of these options and ensuring information on HealthPathways is kept current and relevant to its users would improve its value and trustworthiness among healthcare providers.

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