

Submission to the Australian Communications Authority Digital Data Review,

July 1998

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SUBMISSION TO AUSTRALIAN COMMUNICATIONS AUTHORITY DIGITAL DATA REVIEW

National Rural Health Alliance, July 1998

Summary

The National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) is concerned to ensure that country Australians are in a position to take advantage of the full range of telecommunications services, including the services becoming available in the 'digital age'.

Two particular developments we would like to draw to the Authority's attention relate to telemedicine and distance education.

Telemedicine - NRHA prefers the term *telehealth* - could substantially improve rural access to many health and health-related services. NRHA is watching developments in this area with interest, and is keen to promote promising applications. There are a number of examples of successful operation of telehealth services in existence at present, such as in psychiatry and in bringing some specialist medical services to country towns.

The delivery of *distance education* via new information and communication technologies has the potential to transform access to education and training in this country. Already there are some country people undertaking courses over the Internet from the comfort of their own homes. There are likely to be increasing opportunities to undertake courses in this way - be they from Australian-based or overseas-based institutions.

For both these services and others, accessible, high quality communications are obviously required.

There is a concern among many rural Australians that, far from improving the currently inadequate telecommunications services many of them receive, current developments, such as the proposed full privatisation of Telstra, could result in a diminution of those services. NRHA agrees with the Government therefore in its view that strong external obligations need to be imposed on Telstra. We see an upgrade to a digital capacity under the universal service obligation as an essential component of that obligations regime.

1. Background

The National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) is the peak national body working to improve the health of Australians living in rural and remote areas.

The NRHA is comprised of nineteen Member Bodies, each of which is a national organisation in its own right. The nineteen represent the consumers of

health services and the health professionals providing service to non-metropolitan areas.

The NRHA has a strong multi-professional focus. In its work it emphasises the point that 'health' is much more than the absence of disease. Good health is mental, physical and social well-being. Given this definition, it is clear that a large number of functional areas impact on health outcomes. They include having access to good food, rewarding employment, a comfortable home and positive self-esteem.

One of the corollaries of this is that the work of many agencies has an impact on health outcomes. At government level the relevant agencies include those involved with transport, housing, water and air quality, employment, and indigenous, women's and veterans' affairs. For rural and remote communities in particular, the relevant authorities include those with responsibility for regional development, primary industries, and access and entitlement to land.

Part of the NRHA's core work is to organise the biennial [National Rural Health Conferences](#). It has been clear from the recommendations produced at these and at the other national meetings that transport and communications are still among the first and most worrying issues for rural and remote Australians. This Submission is made by the NRHA as part of its work to enhance and protect those interests of country people which are related directly to their health.

As well as its health implications, access to telecommunications is a key contributor to the commercial, educational and social well-being of rural and remote people.

2. Telecommunications and Country Australians

The underlying importance of high quality and accessible telecommunication services to country Australians does not need to be emphasised.

What does need to be recognised is that this importance is *increasing* as a result of globalisation and the new opportunities opened up by technologies such as the Internet. The Internet has the potential to bring substantial benefits to many rural areas, but because some do not have access to it for technical or financial reasons the gap between those who are 'information-rich' and those who are 'information-poor' is growing wider.

The potential economic benefits of the Internet include:

- improved access to information of benefit to business management decisions - already there are examples of primary producers in Australia using US-based information to which they wouldn't otherwise have access to improve their business management decisions;
- marketing opportunities - already there are examples of primary producers using the Internet to directly market their produce to export markets;

- more competitive sourcing of supply - rural Australians appear to be at least as willing as any other people, if not more willing, to use the Internet to make online purchases;
- new Internet-based businesses, some examples of which are already in existence in rural areas; and
- the growth of telecommuting - already, there are examples of members of farm families telecommuting to workplaces in capital cities hundreds of miles away.

There are also major potential social benefits, from:

- cheap, rapid communications, such as by email or 'net phone;
- improved attractiveness of rural areas to service providers (including doctors and other health professionals);
- telehealth; and
- improved access to education and training.

These benefits take the form of both improved access and reduced need to travel or re-locate to access services.

The important point about these benefits, particularly the social benefits, is that they are largely *social* in nature. Some of the benefits take the form of what economists call 'externalities'; that is, they provide benefits over and above those recognised in purely commercial transactions.

We accept that a number of initiatives are underway to improve rural telecommunications. Chief among these is the digitisation of Telstra's exchanges. However, this

- leaves a significant gap for those more than 5 kilometres from an exchange. For many of these people, poor quality lines - including frequent dropouts and transmission rates inadequate for data purposes - will remain a problem. The Farmwide project estimates that some 5% of primary producers have telephone lines that are incapable of supporting an Internet connection, and a further 22% have line speeds that are simply far too slow for accessing the multimedia capabilities of the World Wide Web, for example; and
- does not necessarily address the need for more broadband links to many smaller country towns necessary for many applications such as in telehealth.

3. Communications and Health Services

Communications have been identified at National Rural Health Conferences and in the National Rural Public Health Forum as being critical issues for health services.

Much is expected of information and communications technologies in health services. In particular there are hopes that *telehealth* may reduce the current inequality of access to health services. (NRHA prefers to talk of *telehealth*

rather than *telemedicine*, because of the multi-disciplinary nature of the health services that can be delivered in this manner.)

The Alliance is following developments in telehealth with interest. Already, valuable activities are conducted in relation to

- training and other information services for rural and remote health staff;
- family reunion, as when a mother can see her baby in a far-away intensive care unit;
- direct delivery of psychiatry services;
- provision to some country towns of high level specialist medical services previously confined to larger cities; and
- emergency evacuations being judged necessary or not necessary with the assistance of a video conference link.

There are a number of barriers to the more widespread adoption of telehealth services. These relate mainly to funding arrangements which provide insufficient incentive for the adoption of most cost-effective technologies where the cost savings are reaped by the patient, such as in reduced travelling time, rather than the service provider.

However, a second set of barriers also exists in a lack of reliable bandwidth for many telehealth applications in many smaller country towns and, in particular, on individual properties. Many of those applications can be quite demanding of bandwidth, and obviously many require not only sufficient bandwidth but also absolute reliability of that bandwidth.

The reality is that the full realisation of the potential for telehealth - and the health and economic benefits pertaining thereto - is absolutely reliant upon universal access to the bandwidth associated with digitisation. If we as a nation are to be serious about realising this full potential, then a positive outcome to the Authority's digital inquiry is absolutely essential.

There is an important additional possibility raised by the new information and communication technologies for rural health. This is that they can help to attract and retain service providers such as doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and managers to country areas because they enable such practitioners to keep up with professional developments and other aspects of their lives in the cities.

4. Distance Education

Telecommunications are an important part of distance education, and becoming increasingly so. Already, many students use email, for example to communicate with their lecturer/teacher. Some courses are becoming available on the World Wide Web, and there are examples of rural Australians undertaking such courses. In addition to students, teachers in rural and remote areas must have access to both their students and their institution. The devolution of teaching to rural centres, for instance to the new University

Departments of Rural Health, depends absolutely on 'communications equity' if it is to succeed.

As noted by the recent 'West' report on higher education policy and funding, the potential for the Internet to deliver education and training services is enormous. A wide variety of courses can be delivered via the Internet, using the World Wide Web and email for delivery of course materials, return of project work, online conferencing systems such as Internet Relay Chat for seminars etc, and bulletin boards and email for asynchronous 'classroom' discussions and direct communication. Improving technology in this area and the potential advantages of cost-effective delivery means that this is likely to be an increasing component of the education and training system. Moreover, such courses can be delivered globally.

The very real prospect is raised of a revolution in access to, and delivery of, many education and training courses. Fewer country Australians will have to leave home to undertake effective study - indeed, they will have the choice of courses from all around the world. Adult education and training can be similarly transformed, as Internet-based courses can be delivered asynchronously and hence in a manner much more convenient for busy people.

Telecommunications are obviously the crucial requirement if country people are to access such possibilities - both sufficient bandwidth to schools, colleges and other institutions, and sufficient line quality to individual households.

Most Australian Universities now do much of their curriculum and also research checks via their own websites. Students are expected to access them daily. Some may have to stay in urban locations rather than do parts of their study from their rural homes, which they could do if they had better communications services.

Rural health workers are already accessing such research organisations as the Cochrane Collaboration and Medline - for the first time, not ever having access to a local library with this sort of up-to-date information. Rural and remote health professionals need quality communications services far more than their metropolitan cousins do, and the NRHA is keen to ensure that they are well looked after in future.

5. Current Policy Developments

One issue of concern to NRHA is whether current policy developments, such as full privatisation of Telstra, will help or hinder the provision of the required telecommunication services to non-metropolitan Australia. This requires both the maintenance of existing service standards, and improvements to those standards, given that sub-standard services are still quite widespread in non-metropolitan Australia.

We are concerned that in the process of transition from a public to a private organisation, Telstra will lose much of the focus it has had on providing universal, as distinct from purely commercial, service. It is inevitable that

management of a privatised organisation will be more concerned to ensure a full commercial return from every asset, less concerned with informal pressures to maximise service levels, and will resist externally-imposed standards in a number of subtle ways. As a result, it is quite possible that the intended *minimum* standards will tend to become *maxima*. Indeed, one way for this to occur is for the standards to fail to keep pace with technological change - as is already the case with the subject of this inquiry, viz, the failure to date of the universal service obligation to keep pace with the development of online services such as the Internet.

NRHA recognises the Government's commitments in respect of universal service, untimed local calls, customer service guarantees and price caps. We agree with the Government that strong external obligations become absolutely essential in a privatised environment. A universal digital capacity is one such obligation.

We accept that there would be some costs in implementing a universal digital standard. We note, however, evidence that many of the claims about the magnitude of those costs are greatly inflated. Second, we point to the Prime Minister's commitment that part of the proceeds of privatisation will go to a 'social bonus'. That provides one avenue for the funding of the costs of a digital standard.

We conclude, however, with the point that the case for a digital standard does not depend on the outcome of the privatisation debate. What ultimately matters is the level of service actually provided - and it is abundantly clear that Telstra, regardless of its ownership status, will not provide a universal digital capability of its own accord. Only a positive outcome to the ACA's inquiry into the matter can ensure that there is, indeed, an 'information superhighway' for country Australians, rather than the dirt track-standard currently in place.

Attachment 1 - A Case Study in Frustration from rural Western Australia

Re: Telecommunication in the Bush

I write on behalf of the Denmark District Health Service. We have just recently had a mobile tower installed (December 2 1998). We were all very excited as we perceived that we (the nursing staff and the doctors on call 24 hours a day seven days a week) would actually be able to leave our homes when we were on call (ie. have a life!). Sadly, this is not the case. Because of the beautiful and picturesque terrain in our area, the range is small and unreliable.

This experience (social isolation) for excellent nurses and doctors recruited to the bush from attracted well remunerated positions in the metropolitan area – **is very frustrating** – we are used to excellent technology – you didn't think twice about being on call – you could live your life as usual. Here – we are confined and frequently suffer with 'cabin fever' (symptoms of frustration and a short fuse).

I often drive long distances in the course of my work. I came across a serious road accident last year – I automatically reached for the mobile phone – "no service". I had to drive for 20 minutes to find a phone for this emergency. Trauma statistics have shown that the first hour following serious trauma is critical. In the bush the first hour could well be spent without a car passing by. When one does – and they have a mobile phone – it would be terrific to access help and support immediately.

Our city dwellers never have to be concerned about communication. We – the rural communities are just 21% of the population – however – we are producing 79% of the wealth. How about some equitable distribution?

We strongly support your position to improve telecommunications in rural Australia.

Kind regards

Signed by the Director of Nursing