

Communications Update

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Medicare smart card plan revealed

A proposal to embed silicon chips into Medicare cards, making them capable of carrying data, appears to be off the ground despite assurances from the Minister for Human Services and Health that there is no such plan and never has been.

A spokesperson for Industry Minister Senator Peter Cook has confirmed not only that a trial program for a Medicare smart card is imminent, but also that the trial cards will carry a 12 months history of the card carrier's drug prescriptions. He also hinted that discussions about adding other community service information, such as social security details and full medical histories, had taken place.

A trial for the card is set down for Orange in NSW in September or October with at least 13 pharmacies and 25 GPs likely to be involved.

The proposal for a Medicare smart card, which has been quietly gathering pace for the past three months, is being driven by a group of interested companies which calls itself the Smart Card Industry Council. Notable companies represented on the council are: Telstra, Transfield, AWA, the software company Security Domain, computer company, Unisys and the electronics company, ERG - part of the Quicklink smart card consortium. The Sydney University-based Warren Centre, which finds financial backers for new technologies, has been heavily involved in finding Federal Government support for the proposal.

In February, Senator Cook asked the Warren Centre to come up with options for using smart cards in government applications. The Pharmacy Guild was approached and gave its support to the proposal for a pharmaceutical smart card to help build a database of information on the types of drugs being prescribed and to ensure that patients are not being prescribed potentially lethal cocktails of incompatible drugs. Overcoming fraud of the pharmaceutical benefits scheme was a further incentive.

But the spectre of the ill-fated Australia Card, which was laid to rest in 1987 after a two-year fight by civil liberties and privacy groups, is worrying a number of the card's proponents.

Vasken Demirian of the Pharmacy Guild told *CU* that the card proposal

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was still 'embryonic' as privacy and civil liberties concerns had to be addressed. 'If it's not handled correctly, there'll be a public backlash', he said. 'We don't want the spectre of the Australia Card to jeopardise us.'

Such concerns have ensured that the proposal is being treated on a strict 'need-to-know' basis in Canberra. The office of Health Minister, Carmen Lawrence, referred *CU* to the department and the Health Insurance Commission.

When we contacted the Health Insurance Commission, which administers the current Medicare Card and which promoted the Australia Card, no-one in senior management had heard of the proposal. General manager Jackie Wood said the HIC had just started a five-year plan for Medicare card reissue and that a smart card was certainly not part of that plan.

Even the Federal Privacy Commissioner's office had been kept in the dark. According to researcher Michelle Pilfrey, the Commission had

received no formal notification of the proposal. She said if Carmen Lawrence pursued a smart card, she would be revoking a commitment from former Health Minister Brian Howe rejecting such a card. Privacy Commissioner, Kevin O'Connor, would be very disappointed if Lawrence went back on this promise, Ms Pilfrey said.

With such potential for a major backlash, especially in an election year, it's curious that the proposal has even reached its current stage. The major concerns with smart cards - especially those based on personal information - are that further applications can be added to chips without the need for cards to be re-issued and that, for the scheme to function properly, the cards need to be carried by the whole population at all times.

Chairman of the NSW Privacy Committee, Chris Puplick described the proposal as 'dishonourable and dishonest.'

'It's highly privacy intrusive without any proper justification,' he said. It's a reversal of assurances that were

given to the public about the expanded use of the Medicare card.

'This is the growing reintroduction of the Australia Card by subterfuge.'

Organisations like Telstra and Security Domain are apparently involved because they see enormous potential for commercial applications for smart cards. Telstra is keen to see a multi-function smart card which can be used in pay-phones as well as vending machines and on public transport. But one industry representative admitted to *CU* that there were concerns that the Medicare card proposal would 'reactivate fears of the Australia Card and Big Brother.'

Clearly Senator Cook sees the financial rewards from government applications of smart cards and as far as the industry group is concerned, current government nervousness may be irrelevant after the next election. A Liberal Government could well have an even more favourable view of smart card use within the government sector. □

Oz Content Standard

A win for Oz viewers

New draft content requirements for commercial television, if adopted, would boost the overall amount of Australian programming transmitted but lock in Australian drama at current levels. The ABA's proposed new Australian content standard would also be a boon for Australian children's programs and documentaries. With more offerings for viewers, a guaranteed local market for the production industry and simpler, more flexible requirements on the stations, the news has to be all good, right? Not quite.

The final draft follows eleven months of industry consultation, public submissions and floated options.

So, should viewers be pleased with the upshot of the review? Although the ABA has not defined the public interest in Australian content, it has virtually preserved the former Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's definition of the object of the standard:

to promote the role of commercial television in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity by supporting the community's continued access to television programs produced under Australian creative control.

So the stated object is full of promise, but the capacity of the standard to deliver must be questioned. Overall

the Australian transmission quota represents an increase from 50 per cent to 55 per cent of transmission time. Whether the television industry will in fact produce and broadcast more new Australian programs is in question because the quota has always allowed repeats. Preserving the quota for first-run drama at current real levels looks good but now second runs of programs first screened on pay TV and the ABC and the SBS will also be counted (see page 3).

The capacity to reflect Australian identity is also diminished by the adoption of 10BA certification (under the Income Tax Assessment Act) as an automatic qualification for movies to be defined as Australian. The prob-