



Australian Government

Department of Health



An Australian Government Initiative

Primary Health Networks Frequently Asked Questions

What are Primary Health Networks (PHNs)?

On 1 July 2015, the Australian Government established 31 PHNs as independent primary health care organisations, located throughout Australia.

The Australian Government has supported the role of regional primary health care organisations for many years, starting with Divisions of General Practice in the 1990s. From 2011, Divisions were replaced with Medicare Locals which were charged with encouraging collaboration between health care professionals, undertaking population health planning and, in many cases, providing services.

The role of PHNs is to commission, rather than provide services. It is the key difference between Medicare Locals and PHNs, and represents a fundamental shift in the way primary health care services are planned for and funded at the regional level.

PHNs make decisions independent of government and are operated by not-for-profit companies. They decide which services or health care interventions should be provided and who should provide them. They also work closely with providers to monitor performance and implement change.

PHNs have two key objectives:

- To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of medical services for patients, particularly those at risk of poor health outcomes.
- To improve the coordination of care to ensure patients receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

What do PHNs do?

PHNs work to reorient and reform the primary health care system by taking a patient-centred approach to medical services in their regions. They have three main roles:

- They commission health services to meet the identified and prioritised needs of people in their regions and address identified gaps in primary health care. This may include working with others in the community to plan and deliver innovative services that meet specific health needs.
- Through practice support, they work closely with general practitioners (GPs) and other health professionals to build health workforce capacity and the delivery of high quality care.
- They work collaboratively within their regions to integrate health services at the local level to create a better experience for patients, encourage better use of health resources, and eliminate service duplication.

The Australian Government has identified seven priority areas to guide the work of PHNs. These include mental health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, population health, digital health, health workforce, aged care, and alcohol and other drugs.

What is involved with ‘commissioning’ health services?

Commissioning is a strategic, evidence-based approach to planning and procuring new health services or changing existing health services, where required. PHNs target and prioritise health services to meet the identified needs of the local community in a continuous cycle of improvement.

This process is focused on outcomes that boost the efficiency, effectiveness and coordination in primary health care and is centred on the health needs of patients. It is informed by detailed assessments of the regional population’s health needs, a market analysis of local health care services, and evaluation of the quality and performance of commissioned services. This ensures that services are prioritised and located in areas where they are most needed.

PHNs work collaboratively within their communities. They have established GP-led Clinical Councils and Community Advisory Committees which ensures that clinicians and the community have input into decisions about primary health care services.

How do PHNs integrate health services?

PHNs work to connect different elements of Australia’s health system so that patients are more likely to receive the right care, in the right place, and at the right time.

PHNs develop partnerships that bring together different health providers and state and territory-based health authorities to create a more holistic system of care. Integrated health services are ideally:

- centred on the needs of the patient
- effective and efficient
- make the best use of health funding.

What is practice support?

PHNs provide education, training and support as a key part of strengthening Australia’s primary health care system.

PHNs support general practitioners and their office staff and other health professionals to improve their efficiency, effectiveness and coordination of care. Practice support activities may include quality improvement initiatives, designing improved models of care, accreditation support, data analysis and Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) billing support.

Where can I find more information about PHNs?

More information about PHNs, including links to the 31 individual PHN websites, is available on the Department of Health’s PHN website at www.health.gov.au/phn.