

Launch of CareConnect: a health information exchange for SA

The launch of South Africa's first industry-wide Health Information Exchange (HIE), emanating from the private health sector, marks a significant milestone in its history.



Source: Supplied.

The CareConnect HIE has been in development for the past two years and was founded by six of the country's leading hospital groups and medical-scheme administrators to foster collaboration across the private healthcare sector.

Through this collaboration, clinical data and information will be shared with the ultimate goal of improving patient care and efficiencies in the health sector.

Dr Rolan Christian, chief executive officer of CareConnect, believes that the CareConnect HIE, much like other HIEs around the world, is a necessary innovation that will support a co-ordinated health system through a reliable, secure, and unified digital platform.

“The CareConnect HIE will allow clinicians to access up-to-date, real-time, consolidated clinical information about their patient’s journey across the healthcare ecosystem, thereby improving the speed, quality and co-ordination of care,” says Dr Christian.

In essence, the HIE will enable speedy and secure electronic transfer of information between hospitals, medical schemes or insurers, and other health-service providers in the interest of better patient care and practitioner support in real-time.

“From the get-go, there was recognition by hospital groups and medical-scheme administrators that greater efficiencies could be achieved by providing clinicians with relevant and meaningful patient information when and where they need it,” adds chairman of CareConnect’s Board of Directors, Matthew Prior, saying that the need for a more integrated approach to healthcare in the private sector was a key driver in developing the HIE.

A much-needed time saver

In everyday clinical situations, HIEs provide a holistic set of patient clinical information, thereby saving precious time for clinicians, reducing medical errors, and helping to decrease the cost of healthcare by avoiding duplicate and unnecessary tests.

The participation of health professionals will therefore be key to the future development of the CareConnect HIE to ensure that the system continues to add value to their work.

“For patients, access to the HIE can mean the difference between life and death in an emergency situation or when travelling, as the treating doctor will be able to access critical, up-to-date health information in real-time, on any device, be it a laptop, mobile phone or tablet, wherever they are,” says Dr Christian.

Since coming online in late 2021, more than 3.2 million patients have given consent to share their data with the HIE, and since October last year, these patients have created more 27 million transactions of clinical data that are available on the HIE.

Security and confidentiality of information are cornerstones of the CareConnect HIE which conforms to both local and international data privacy regulations, such as ISO 27001/27701 and Popia. In addition to these strict data privacy and governance standards, all participants in the HIE have signed data privacy agreements that govern the purposes for which information can be used.



Consolidation and acquisitions will become key focus areas for private healthcare into the future

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“Information always remains protected and may only be accessed by authorised users. Sensitive information, such as health information, may only be accessed by medical practitioners when medically necessary and only with a patient’s consent,” concludes Dr Christian.

Built on an internationally recognised technology platform, called InterSystems HealthShare, which has been widely used in the development of HIEs across the globe, the CareConnect HIE will enable interoperability between different systems, like medical-scheme administrators, clinics, hospitals, rehabilitation centres, radiology practices, pathology laboratories and clinicians’ practice management systems.

“This bodes well for the future of the entire health system as it will allow for information from a variety of sources to be

securely integrated,” says Dr Christian.

A bridge with the public healthcare sector

Though starting in the private sector, CareConnect also believes the HIE enables a bridge with the public healthcare sector. A case in point is the South African Government’s recognition of the importance of digitisation in improving access to quality healthcare and in its *National Digital Health Strategy for South Africans (2019–2024)*, which outlines key objectives toward realising efficiencies, including:

- the digitisation of health systems business processes to improve efficiency and quality at an institutional level for human resource and medicine access, and
- establishing an integrated platform and architecture for the health-sector information system, which will ensure interoperability and linkage of existing patient-based information systems.

"HIE is becoming a policy imperative for many governments to address health-system fragmentation and better co-ordination of care, and is already being used by many advanced health systems in the world, including China, England, India, Scotland, Switzerland, and the United States.

"While the CareConnect HIE is still in its infancy, the number of transactions are constantly growing, with founding member organisations already beginning to derive value from the HIE through streamlined hospital admission procedures and the introduction of new efficiencies into their systems,” ends Dr Christian.

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