



## Australian Financial Review

17 August 2010

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# NBN critical for e-health

Companies that specialise in electronic health and information technology have strongly welcomed Labor's \$392 million pledge to make video consultations eligible for Medicare rebates – but said the national broadband network (NBN) would be needed to make it work.

The chief executive of iSoft, Gary Cohen, said the funding was “a very positive step towards what's obviously the necessary step of moving a lot of healthcare online”.

“The national broadband network is an essential building block for creating connected healthcare,” Mr Cohen said. “There's a demand to be able to do lots of things online that would save an enormous amount of energy and effort; for example, being able to get a repeat prescription.”

Australian Information Industry Association chief executive, Ian Birks, said the announcement by Prime Minister Julia Gillard was “a much-needed focus on the economic and social returns associated with digital infrastructure in Australia”.

“Well-planned broadband infrastructure has the potential to bridge the healthcare divide that exists between metropolitan and regional

Australia. Labor has promised to build a high-speed national broadband network.

The Australian head of networking provider Polycom, Michael Chetner, said his company was already helping to provide remote video consultation facilities for critical care in Victoria.

Mr Chetner said facilities allowed faster access to medical specialists in areas such as “virtual trauma” treatment that allowed regional health providers, such as Loddon Mallee, to get help from big city hospitals by sending a patient's vital signs over the line at the same time they were being viewed. But he cautioned that fast broadband that allowed video signals and other patient data to be sent at the same time was necessary for such services to work effectively in regional areas.

Telstra has also moved into telemedicine and e-health. Last month it signed a memorandum of understanding with the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners to provide its members with access to multiple healthcare applications through a web-hosted service to provide high-quality patient care.