

# Innovation in Primary Care

2015 – 2024

29 February 2024



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## SPOTLIGHT ON INNOVATION

Since the inception of the Hunter New England and Central Coast Primary Health Network (the PHN) in 2015, our firm vision has been to focus on innovation in primary care with a desire to effect change at both a program and systemic level to improve health outcomes.

It is timely, as we continue to navigate the changing health landscape, to reflect on and celebrate innovation across the HNECC PHN's diverse activities.

Innovation is a word that is embedded in the PHN's philosophy and mission. It is featured in our organisational values and is a necessary element of our purpose:

*Our Values – Innovation - We will invest in new and better ways to improve the health system so that people stay well and out of hospital.*

*Our Purpose – Increase equity of access to primary care services.*

The PHN continues to explore innovation not only in larger flagship projects and initiatives but also in everyday work and tasks to ensure that it continues to push forward into new territory. It is acknowledged there is much to be done to improve health outcomes for our communities, and the rapid rate of change in health technology and across the primary care workforce, ensures that the PHN will continue to innovate for its region and the diverse communities comprised within.



The PHN's 2023 – 2028 Strategic Plan highlights the significant challenges and our key ambitions for the region, particularly in the areas of workforce and service access. The application of innovative ideas and approaches are more critical than ever in addressing these.

This paper provides a spotlight on some of the innovations developed and implemented by the PHN from inception in 2015 through to 2022 and offers insights into areas of potential future innovation for the organisation. It is by no means exhaustive but does provide a year-by-year review of the PHN's notable achievements. It demonstrates the commitment the PHN has had to continuing to push the envelope through new ideas and approaches whilst keeping the vision of Healthy People and Healthy Communities at its forefront.



## 2015 - 16 FOUNDING YEAR

The PHN commenced in July 2015 with a firm vision around innovation with Flagship Initiatives highlighted in the first annual report:

*The PHN developed leading funding and care strategies to better support those with chronic disease risk factors or mental illness (including Aboriginal people, young people or older people) to keep well in the community.*

The inaugural HNECC PHN board determined that “innovation” was to be a continuing contribution to the organisational purpose. Three key considerations were applied to all activities which were:

- *How is the activity innovative?*
- *How is the activity locally relevant?*
- *How will the activity be evaluated?*

In this first year of operation, the INNOV8 Health Development Initiative was introduced to the HNECC region. The INNOV8 online hub offered an informative online space for healthcare stakeholders to engage and collaborate. It was a clearing house for local innovative endeavours and provided up-to-date information on innovation support, including resources and information about innovation funding streams.

The Collaborative Health Innovation Project was the first INNOV8 initiative that promoted collaborative efforts between organisations. The purpose of the project was to identify, encourage and fund health innovation projects.

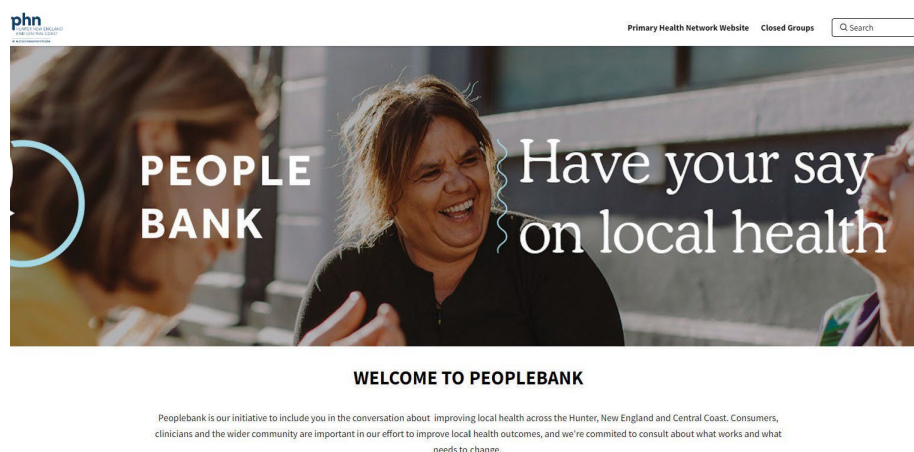
Two other initiatives, HealthPathways and SeNT e-referral were seeded in 2016 and would grow into Flagship Innovations in the following years.

## 2016 – 17 BUILDING INNOVATION FOCUS

Opening statements within the 2017 annual report from Ms Jane Schwager AO Chairperson, reflected the PHN's increasing focus on innovation:

*“We have worked hard at being innovative, seeking improved service models and systems to provide better primary health care across the HNECC PHN. Innovation is about creating opportunities to trial new and novel ways to tackle ‘sticky’ problems. This report highlights a range of examples where our staff have created opportunities to design and trial initiatives that will bring about better health outcomes for our people and communities.”*

The SeNT e-Referral project was developed to improve the communication and transfer of referral information between GPs and Specialists. Integrated with HealthPathways, this work was developed in partnership with Hunter New England Local Health District and was an early example of how the PHN supported clinicians to attain the highest standards in performance, safety and quality.



### HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Increasing meaningful communication with stakeholders became a focus for the PHN in this year, resulting in the implementation of Peoplebank, a new online consultation platform. The true benefits of Peoplebank were highlighted when more than 500 online responses were received during the development of the Regional Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan. Peoplebank is still used as a central communication channel hosting many grants and Expression of Interest exercises.

During this year the PHN region's strength in innovative research was rewarded when it was chosen by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) to become a Centre for Innovation in Regional Health (CIRH). One of only two such centres in the country.

## 2017 - 18 CONTINUING INNOVATIONS

In February 2018 the PHN Board approved a formal Innovation Framework which recommended definitions of Innovation to be accepted by the PHN and to utilise these definitions to map existing and developing initiatives.

This year also saw a focus on Aboriginal health and communities with several innovative programs developed to support better health outcomes in the region's Aboriginal communities. Ambulance Care Plans for Aboriginal People that empowered Aboriginal communities to make better use of ambulance services was one way the Primary Health Network worked to close the gap in health outcomes for Aboriginal communities across the Hunter New England region.

In 2017-18 the PHN held the second Pitch Night which focused on initiatives aimed at improving health outcomes for Aboriginal communities. A pitch night is an event held for organisations to pitch their innovative ideas to gain exposure and funding. It can best be described as a hybrid of crowd funding and a 'dragon's den' or 'shark tank' event.



2017 was also the year the PHN commenced developing the Healthy Weight Initiative which involved developing and trialing a model of care for General Practice to support people to reach a healthy weight and reduce their risk of chronic disease.

## 2018 - 19 A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN

The PHN's commitment to innovation was reinforced in a new Strategic Plan, and in line with the plan, work actively progressed toward an outcomes-based commissioning model that focused on value-based health care. This involved seeking innovative solutions and exploring how improved health outcomes could be achieved for the lowest cost.

In this year the PHN also introduced program-based Patient Reported Measure (PRM) trial activities that provided a mechanism to measure and evaluate patients' own perceptions of their experience while receiving care.

In 2019 the PHN Grants Program was launched to provide an agile mechanism to distribute funds into the community based on health needs. The Grants program provided an opportunity to fund innovative ideas and approaches from a variety of organisations. Through the grants program the PHN was also able to trial some new ways of applying for grant funding designed particularly to assist smaller and Aboriginal organisations in the application process. Yarning and video applications were introduced and were well received by applicants.

The Empowering our Communities grant initiative provided funding for community-led mental health and social and emotional wellbeing initiatives that supported communities significantly impacted by drought conditions. The program distributed over \$1 million across 55 organisations for over 300 activities across the region.

To further support better Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander health outcomes a series of healing forum consultation events were held across the region. These community forums explored intergenerational trauma and traditional healing and the findings were used to inform ongoing Aboriginal Mental Health work.

## 2019 - 20 A PANDEMIC RESPONSE

This financial year tested the resilience and commitment to innovation of the PHN to continually seek out new solutions to the unprecedented circumstances experienced across the region through continued drought, devastating bushfires and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The COVID-19 period provided opportunity for innovation like no other time in the PHN's history. The magnitude of the situation meant the PHN needed to be open to innovation as daily developments and rapid elements of change mandated the need to look beyond the status quo and business as usual.

The development of the Emergency Operations Centre and the implementation of the Capacity Tracker were two examples of innovative approaches adopted by the PHN. Alongside these emergency response efforts, the PHN continued to innovate where possible in a business-as-usual context. However, the PHN was mindful of the extreme pressure the primary care sector was under and focused on supporting practices to work through the crisis circumstances.

The PHN was successful in receiving funding for two innovative pilot programs through the Department of Health. The Movement Disorder Nurse Pilot and the Family and Domestic Violence pilots offered opportunities for the PHN to be at the forefront of innovative models of care in these areas.

## 2020 - 21 AN EXTENDED PANDEMIC

Despite the burdens of the previous twelve months and actually because of them, the PHN recognised the need to continue to focus on innovation and new ways of working. As a result, a time-limited team was assembled to leverage from the learnings of the COVID pandemic.

The COVID Recovery team was a project-focused team that worked alongside existing portfolios to deliver a scope of work designed to support and enhance existing activities. Project areas included Telehealth, Capacity Tracker, Remote Monitoring, Allied Health, Primary Care in Aged Care and Sharing Success and Supporting recovery.

Two highlights of the year were the inaugural Primary Care Quality and Innovation Awards held in June and the COVID-19 Innovation Showcase held in May. Both events were designed to highlight quality and innovation across the primary care sector. The COVID-19 Innovation showcase welcomed presenters from General Practice, Mental Health, Pharmacy, Allied Health, LHDs and Aged Care providers who all shared stories of how they innovated amidst the challenges of COVID-19.



## 2021 – 22 INNOVATION IN ACTION & IMPACT ON OUR COMMUNITIES

In the year's Covid Impact Survey, primary care clinicians reported that their two areas of most concern were the emotional and mental health of primary care workers, and management of their patients' chronic health conditions. Workforce shortages and pressures, driven by a range of factors, created a perfect storm for GP burnout and fatigue.

The PHN found itself increasingly addressing workforce issues, including through the successful implementation of several incentive schemes, to recruit GPs to the region. In the previous 12 months, PHN incentives supported the recruitment of 27 new GPs to the region.

The PHN also invested \$1 million over the twelve months to provide 200 general practices, allied health practices and residential aged care facilities with \$5,000 digital health grants to improve general digital health capabilities.

In the midst of the ongoing challenges the year presented, PHN teams identified a number of exciting opportunities which resulted in flagship projects and innovative activities such as hosting the inaugural Allied Health Conference #WeCareTogether. It saw 15 of the region's allied health professionals showcasing a variety of informative topics to a large and diverse audience.



In the first half of 2022 the SeNT eReferral system, originally launched in 2016, clocked up a milestone of 100,000 referrals electronically transmitted to over 450 HNELHD and private health providers across the region.

In March 2022 the annual Commissioning Innovation Showcase brought PHNs from across the country together to learn and share their commissioning experiences; and the second Primary Care Quality and Innovation Awards, held in June 2022, provided an opportunity to showcase innovation and excellence across the primary care sector.

## 2022 – 23 EVALUATION OF INNOVATION

In the 2022 - 23 financial year the PHN continued to innovate to improve equity of access to primary health care. A new model of care combining virtual and outreach GP appointments saw the town of Spring Ridge in the North West have a GP for the first time in 30 years. An initiative of the PHN's Better Health for the Bush, Small Town Engagement Model (BHFTB - STEM), the PHN provided funding to deliver the hybrid General Practice service



for a 12-month period. The program's future direction is to continue to source new co-located sites throughout the New England North West and build a networked model of care.

The Federal Government's election promise to open 50 new Urgent Care Clinics (UCCs) across Australia lead to the HNECC region delivering four clinics. After 6 months of operation, UCCs across the state assisted more than 175,000 people seeking non-life-threatening medical care to avoid NSW hospital emergency departments (EDs). The four UCCs were commissioned in Tamworth, Cessnock, Wyong and Woy Woy.

The Federal Government also committed to restoring Medicare by providing grants to all general practices. More than eight million dollars was provided to 339 general practices across the HNECC regions, under the Commonwealth Government's Strengthening Medicare Grants Program. The investment totalled just under \$10m.

## **2023 – FEB. 24 A NEW DIRECTION FOR INNOVATION**

As year one of the 2023-2028 Strategic Plan, the 2023-24 financial year has taken innovation to new heights, with almost half of the nineteen, Year 1 projects of the Strategic Plan focussed on innovation.

In January 2024, the PHN launched the Sustainability and Viability Initiative, the first region-wide, general practice business support initiative. Over fifty per cent of practices opted in to phase 1 of the initiative, the Assessment Platform and Survey, revealing where general practices are struggling the most.

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention initiatives introduced in 2024 are calling on community members, businesses, organisations and entrepreneurs for participation. The PHN's Pitch Nights have been relaunched for community advice on Suicide Prevention programs that would best suit the needs of their local communities. The Mental Health Innovation Challenge, a partnership with the University of Newcastle and University of New England, has utilised the minds and dedication of regional health professionals and community members to design programs that may assist with declining mental fitness throughout the region.



Game Changer Digital Health Technology Grants, with a total value of \$1 million, are challenging the health community to provide genuinely innovative programs, services or devices that can increase access to primary care across the region. The result of the grant round will be revealed in the 2024-25 financial year.

The PHN was also awarded funding under the Federal Government's Innovative Models of Care program to establish a Health Hub in Glen Innes which will provide multidisciplinary care to the region. Community and stakeholder engagement has been pivotal to the design of the hub.

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Note: This report is an abridged version of the report [Innovating in Primary Care 2015 – 2022](#) first published in 2023

## INNOVATION HIGHLIGHTS

2015-17

Innovate Hub, Collaborative Health Innovation Project, eReferrals, HealthPathways, HNE Diabetes Alliance Clinics, Pitch Night, Peoplebank, Healthy Weight Initiative, PHN Scholarships Program, CIRH

2017-18

Practice Network (AoD), Cultural Audit & Framework, Rural Telehealth ENT Clinic, National PHN Commissioning Showcase

2018-19

Pitch Night, PHN Grants Program, Aboriginal Health Capacity Building, Healing Forums, Suicide Prevention Dynamic Simulation Modelling, Mental Health Access & Referral Service, Central Coast Diabetes Alliance Clinics

2019-20

Bushfire Community Support Grants, COVID Support Grants – Telehealth, AoD Regional Partnerships, PHN Capacity Tracker, PHN Emergency Operations Centre, Livestream Webinars, Rural Communities Strategy

2020-21

2022 Primary Care Quality & Innovation Awards, inaugural Allied health Conference, GP & Allied Health Wellbeing Grants, Primary Care Domestic Family Violence Program, Care Navigation (Armidale Refugee Community)

2022-22

Commissioning Innovation Showcase, Digital Health Grants, Movement Disorder Nurse specialist (MDNS) Pilot, Primary Mental Health Services for Children, Telepsychiatry pilot, Veterans Care Navigation Program

2022-23

Strengthening Medicare Grants, launch of Urgent Care Clinics, Digital Health Strategy, Spring Ridge GP Outreach/Virtual Model, Frailty Early Intervention Program, Nurse Practitioner Pilot in Aged Care, Coffee on Country Podcast.

2023-24

Pitch Night, Mental Health Innovation Challenge, Game Changer Digital Technology Grants, Stronger Together Allied Health Conference, Sustainability and Viability Initiative (SAVI), Innovative Models of Care (IMOC) Federal Funding for Glen Innes Health Hub, End-of-Life-Care Coordination Pilot, Partners for Change – SEWB Public/Private Partnership.

**PRIMARY  
HEALTH  
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**phn**  
HUNTER NEW ENGLAND  
AND CENTRAL COAST

An Australian Government Initiative