

Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network

Answers to Questions on Notice

Committee Hearing 4 November 2020

NBN Co Limited

Question No: 8

Division: Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network

Hearing name: Business case for the NBN and the experience of small businesses

Topic: Telehealth connectivity Pacific Islands and South-East Asia

Question type: Spoken, Hansard Ref: Page 25-26, 04/11/2020

Dr Allen asked:

Dr ALLEN: I concur with that 100 per cent, as a medical practitioner myself who has worked with regional and remote practitioners. The use of telehealth has been good in the past, but it has been so enthusiastically embraced. It is obviously not just for rural and remote as well; it's also for city dwellers who are trying to get across congested traffic to get somewhere, having to take off large parts of their day to sit in a medical practice. Telehealth increases the productivity for people right across Australia. My question is more that the legacy of telehealth is going to be felt profoundly for many decades to come. My question also goes not just to our provision of the NBN as a supporting platform for that to Australians and to those who live remotely, but I wondered whether you could give me an insight—this might be a question on notice—about the ability for Australia to provide telehealth services and connectivity to our Pacific Island neighbours or even into South-East Asia in any way. This might be just an interesting question, I suppose. Have you thought about that? Is there an ability, as a platform, for the NBN to provide leadership technically and digitally for outreach services beyond our rural and remote Australians, but into our neighbours as well?

Mr Rue: We haven't thought of that. There are a few other comments I would like to make in a minute, because I think they're important. We have not thought about how Australia could provide services to Pacific nations. We're happy to take that on notice and provide a bit of thought around that, although that obviously depends upon the capability at the other end of networks. Let us take that on notice. Thank you for the challenge.

I would like to say that one of the things that is very noticeable—it is very noticeable in the medical profession but it is noticeable across businesses more generally—is that some medical practitioners are not on the right plan. So it's important that the practitioners understand the capability of networks and also understand that our networks can provide perhaps greater speeds than they're already on. So we decided, as part of COVID, to give some free upgrades to clinics, which we felt was important to ensure that people had the right speed plans and the right capability for what we thought might be an increase in telehealth and video. That is a message that we do generally want to get out.

Again, if I could stray outside of my area, I'm supposed to, we're providing a digital backbone. We can do our piece in trying to build capability. Both health and education are areas where hopefully policy can be developed and assistance can be given to both educators and medical professionals into how those particular services can be delivered better to patients. Things like speed, but also there is no doubt in my mind that over the next few years there will be new applications built with greater capability, moving from just providing assistance to patients, but then also understanding how things like e-prescriptions or patient's history on a screen, that sort of thing, can be developed

to provide a greater service to patients. Sorry if I am going outside my bounds of responsibility, but it is something I hope to see being developed. Applications will be developed in the private sector, but the methodology of lifting digital capability of educators and medical professionals is important.

In terms of Pacific Islands, we will see if our colleagues in Foreign Affairs are doing any work on that. We will see if we can assist and we're happy to assist if we can, I can assure you, Dr Allen.

Answer:

The provision of broadband services to other countries would be an issue best addressed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has previously announced programs to support connectivity in neighbouring countries; for example:

www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/coral-sea-cable-lands-australia