



Group Management
323 Argent Street
Broken Hill NSW 2880

Wednesday, 20 July 2011

Committee Secretary
Joint Committee on the National Broadband Network
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Submission to Parliamentary Committee Inquiry

Outback Pharmacies welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee on the role and potential of the National Broadband Network (NBN) in achieving health outcomes, government programs, impacting regional economic growth, business efficiencies and revenues for Broken Hill, the remote communities of Far West New South Wales and the corresponding ~160,000 square kilometres of regional Australia.

Please find enclosed our Submission for the Parliamentary Inquiry into the National Broadband Network. Our submission has been prepared in consultation with the Terms of Reference initially provided by the House of Representatives; as the Terms of Reference for the Joint Committee is to report on the roll-out, achievement of targets and performance of the rollout. Hence, given that the NBN is yet to reach Broken Hill this submission highlights the reasons for the need for the NBN to be rolled out with a matter of priority to this region.

I acknowledge that no Commercial in Confidence information has been provided in this submission, and that no part herein requires censorship.

Should you require further information I may be contacted on (08) 8087 6173.

Yours Sincerely,

Mr Dan O'Halloran B.Com B.Pharm CPA GAICD MPS
Manager Finance/Governance/Strategy

Introduction

The Outback Pharmacy Group was established in 1984 after a group of individual pharmacies that had been operating in Broken Hill since 1893 had collaborated to serve the communities of Far West New South Wales; covering approximately 160,000 square kilometres. The group works collaboratively with the Royal Flying Doctors Service, Maari Ma Indigenous Health Service, the local aged care facilities and the Broken Hill Department of Rural Health.

Detail

This submission has been prepared in accordance with relevant aspects of the initial Terms of Reference (TOR) for the *Inquiry into the role and potential of the NBN*. The TOR for the Joint Committee is to report on the rollout of the NBN and hence given that the NBN is yet to reach Broken Hill this submission would like to highlight the urgency to which current services need to be upgraded. The rollout of the NBN to Broken Hill will enable the NBN Co. to ensure their achievement of the Corporate Plan to ensure simultaneous roll out in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

a) Delivery of government services & program;

Outback Pharmacies provides a Pharmacist to the Maari Ma Indigenous Health Services (Maari Ma) in a move to assist with 'Closing the Gap'; and improving the health outcomes of the local indigenous population.

The NBN will enable:

- Our Pharmacists to enhance the level of support to Maari Ma and improve the current health outcomes of the indigenous population; through improved access to Continued Professional Development (CPD) programs available via teleconference, webinar and the internet. Due to the locality, access and professionals living in Broken Hill to cover the leave of one of our Pharmacists it is challenging to ensure that our staff have access to the level of CPD available that is offered in Metropolitan areas;
- Our Pharmacists to have access to dispensing information from our sites when consulting patients at Maari Ma; allowing for improved patient care and communication between health professionals, ultimately leading to improved health outcomes for the Indigenous population; and
- Improved communication between Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) Pharmacists around Australia working towards 'Closing the Gap'.

b) Achieving health outcome;

At present the group has invested significantly in IT infrastructure across our operational sites; in a move towards improving access to information to improve the health outcomes of our patients in the local nursing home facilities. However, due to the limitations of the infrastructure available to Telstra the speed of communication has led to an inefficient and more costly business plan; that would not have been the case if Telstra has access to the same level of infrastructure available in Metropolitan areas. Subsequently, this will lead to

increased costs in implementing such services and programs that have the potential to improve health outcomes for the community and in some situations making the business plan non-feasible due to the costs attributable to the quality of the infrastructure available in the public domain.

Further the current level of communication services provided to remote areas in our region is substandard compared to metropolitan areas of Australia. On numerous occasions lines of communication between our patients and our stores are so poor that it may take multiple attempts to ensure that the correct details have been communicated. This is of concern particularly when a patient is ordering medication, as a miscommunication due to poor transmission may lead to a potential situation where the patient is supplied with the incorrect medication. Due to the isolation of many of the communities relying on such services where by a phone order is placed and the medications posted out, such events of miscommunication are of a more serious nature compared to a metropolitan area. It is hoped that the NBN will make some contribution to improving the clarity of lines of communication between our stores and our patients in these remote communities.

c) Improving educational resources and training available for Teachers & Students;

As part of Outback Pharmacies relationship with the University of Sydney, our Pharmacists provide training to Pharmacy Students on placement with the Broken Hill Department of Rural Health. So as to ensure the best quality of training for those students and health outcomes for the community the group is required to maintain a highly skilled workforce that is continuously trained, so as to ensure that we provide the best possible professional services.

The NBN would allow our Pharmacists and students to have access to more resources that would have been available to them in the City. The impact on these students and also our Pharmacists is that their role can become professionally isolating as they may not be able to access CPD events and training as frequently as they may have been accustomed to in Metropolitan areas. This subsequently has an impact on our ability to attract and retain quality Pharmacists to the region; subsequently having an impact on the level of training that can be provided to the Pharmacy Students and also have an impact on the health outcomes of the community.

d) The management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability;

Not applicable

e) Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities;

The group has currently invested in IT infrastructure and new finance systems to support the growth of the business; in addition to allowing for improved health outcomes of those patients living on stations outside of Broken Hill. The NBN will allow us to offer improved professional services to these communities as communication should be quicker and more reliable.

f) Impacting business efficiencies & revenues, particularly small & medium businesses

The group has recently investigated means of improving efficiencies within our administrative processes; however the speed of internet available has led to increase costs. Due to these increased costs we have had to compromise on the level of efficiencies available as the projects are no longer viable. However, the level of efficiencies that we wanted to attain were merely to be able to see financial data at another site less than 50m away; where at times it is quicker to physically go to the site compared to accessing it over our (Virtual Private Network) VPN; where it is limited by the infrastructure available in the region.

Due to the limited access to professional services in the region, the NBN will allow for more timely transfer of data between legal and financial advisers providing such services. Improved access to data should allow for improvements in the quality of advice sought and provided; and lead to better outcomes for the local community.

The Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme (PBS) reforms have caused financial implications to some pharmacies throughout Australia; where by the financial viability of operations has come into question. Pharmacies are not remunerated for advice or triage services; and subsequently to ensure that the public is able to seek the same level of services provided by Pharmacies in the past then increased financial advice and management is required. In the past the PBS remuneration often subsidised these free services; however due to cuts in this remuneration by Government and remuneration not keeping in line with Consumer Price Indexation (CPI) such services are slowly becoming a time of eras gone bye. Given that margins are reducing the sector has required access to professional advice on a timelier basis. Further it is also important to have the ability to implement business efficiencies that other businesses operating in Metropolitan areas are able to access. It is believed that the NBN will go some way towards enabling more equitable access for Regional Australia and its communities so as to address these requirements.

g) Interaction with research and development and related innovation investments;

Not applicable

h) Facilitating community and social benefits; and

Pharmacists are often contacted as means of advice and triage. Due to the large area serviced by the Outback Pharmacies it is important that our means of communications are reliable and efficient. Further, due to the array of advice sought the ability to gain access to relevant reference material within a timely manner is also important. The NBN may facilitate in improving this function.

i) The optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes.

The NBN is believed to be able to facilitate improvements to our internal processes and also to the services provided to our patients. It will also allow for improve communication between remote communities and between health professionals; subsequently leading to improvements in health outcomes.

Summary

The NBN is believed to be able to facilitate improvements to our internal processes; our financial sustainability; to the services provided to our patients; and communication between remote communities and healthcare professionals; ultimately leading to improvements in health outcomes and potential savings to government.