

## ProCare Health Limited



### The lifeblood of medical management

ProCare Health Limited is one of New Zealand's largest Independent Practitioners' Associations (IPAs) looking after the health needs of at least 650,000 patients.

With 394 affiliated GP members – a total which is rising steadily – ProCare represents about 164 medical practices. Its mission quite simply captures its reason for being.

*To be New Zealand's leader in managing the provision of quality community-based health care by:*

- *Providing access to professional services for those who require them*
- *Ensuring the quality of these services*
- *Integrating health services.*

ProCare is the combination of four individual IPA groups – two in the south of Auckland, one in the centre and one covering the north and west. They correspond with the city's district health boards.

ProCare contracts to the boards and other organisations to deliver community health, which supports national health strategies while easing pressures on hospitals.

#### **In Auckland, ProCare is spearheading initiatives in:**

- free annual diabetes-related health checks
- quit smoking programmes
- breast health screening
- child health and immunisation
- immediate and inexpensive minor surgery
- mental health and psychological help
- free sex advice for the under 22s
- flu vaccines
- cultural sensitivities in the health sector.

In many cases, these public health services and special programmes are subsidised in order to make them accessible via ProCare practices.

ProCare's information system manager, Mr Ken Leech, says lowering barriers to health services enhances the health and welfare of the community. ProCare's doctors work together in local areas, often in conjunction with hospitals and specialists, to encourage healthy lifestyles and keep people well.



ProCare's information system manager, Mr Ken Leech

Communication is increasingly an integral part of that health drive, he says. "We recognise that communication with all sorts of organisations is a critical success factor for the delivery of high quality general practice."

ProCare and HealthLink have been strategic partners for almost five years, working on the development of communication solutions and Ken is adamant HealthLink's contribution will be even more significant in the future.

HealthLink contracts to provide electronic messaging services to all ProCare members with ProCare managing that relationship. With ProCare's network of health providers – GPs, practice staff, clinicians, specialists, hospitals, other practices, specialist nurses, its own community health co-ordinators, and pharmacists, messaging is the lifeblood of medical management.

"Messaging is one of the cornerstones of HealthLink's service as it improves the quality of information held about each patient and the access to that information.

"More than anything, it is the efficiency of the system. Having patient data filed electronically is a most effective system and it adds considerable value to our members.

"By getting information to our members faster, it improves their efficiency as well. Messaging is the bread and butter of communication in public health."

As an example, he cites the importance of lipid test results filed electronically and readily accessible.

"In the management of diabetes, it is important to understand the blood glucose level but that measure is also important in the management of cardiovascular risk so electronic data is re-usable for different diagnoses, all of which improves the quality of care delivered to a patient."

ProCare recognised early on that HealthLink understood the operations of general practice and the priorities for small business managers.

"One crucial factor in working with HealthLink is to make the process simple," Ken says.

Nowhere has that been more clearly demonstrated than connection to the Internet. ProCare subscribes to SECURIT, HealthLink's broadband security system.

"Broadband internet access offers numerous ways to improve the management of disease and the quality of health care to patients. It is a more and more critical tool in the delivery of high quality general practice," Ken says.

In the management of cardiovascular risk, ProCare provides the latest guidelines on cardiovascular health using a decision support tool to provide a snapshot to its members on what needs to be addressed with patients.

"It may cover lifestyle issues, medications, and risk factors like smoking," Ken says. "To offer such a resource, broadband internet access is critical."

Members can also subscribe to MD Consult, a specialist medical library accessible electronically containing the latest medical references, journals and texts to address common – and not so common – medical challenges.

With web access, ProCare wanted a simple, workable...and secure system.

"The level of security has got to meet the demands of the health sector for privacy and confidentiality of sensitive patient data."

Over a period of some nine months, ProCare and HealthLink worked on a broadband strategy to meet the expectations of members.

"Any old internet connection isn't good enough because of the sensitivity of information. Patients need to know that the information isn't compromised by internet connectivity. "We don't want a hacker sitting somewhere in Asia trying to break into patient notes and neither do we want a virus which destroys the lifeblood of information.

"HealthLink and SECURIT provide that assurance, security and support," he says.

Members have been easily persuaded and many of their practices use HealthLink's broadband offering along with electronic messaging.

"Once our members are on broadband access, they can't believe how they ever did without it."

**Ken describes HealthLink as conservatively innovative. "We want to innovate with care...that's the approach that HealthLink takes. They're responsible and dependable."**

With a desire to 'encourage and support better communication in the health sector,' ProCare is keen to see "organisations like HealthLink succeed because they share that vision. It's a strategic vision for improving structured electronic communication flows in the health sector."

Relations with HealthLink have strengthened as the significance of communication has expanded.

**"We are more and more dependent on communications and therefore we are more and more dependent on the people that make it happen. HealthLink is certainly making it happen in the health sector and especially in primary health care."**

"We have mutual recognition that a sound communications infrastructure is critical and is going to be more critical in the future to deliver quality primary health care."

Ken is excited about future potential for communications but quickly adds it will only happen with a good communications infrastructure to support better health.

"Our free annual checks for diabetes are largely handled electronically all via HealthLink. We can show how the health of diabetics is being improved because we collect the information electronically."

"We also help our GPs with the quality of their care of diabetics by being able to benchmark GPs and look for successful trends and patterns and that can only be of benefit to the patients themselves."

It not only applies to diabetes but equally to cardiovascular risk management, mental or sexual health, and smoking cessation. Take the last as an example, Ken says.

"We can now build a database of people enrolling in quit smoking programmes and record all the visits a patient makes and whether the programme is successful."

"We know how many people have succeeded in giving up smoking, what medications have been most effective and what other factors contribute to people being able to quit."

With such information, ProCare can then refine the treatments and the programme "and limit resources to those patients with higher likelihood of success.

"That means better targeting of scarce health dollars which results in the taxpayer ultimately getting better value for money."

That's quite an achievement from the implementation of electronic communication, he adds.