

Data Linkage Unit Video Voice Over

Welcome to the Data Linkage Unit video presentation. We'd like to tell you what it is we do and why it is important to the health of all Western Australians.

We'll start with where the data we use comes from.

Everybody has a book of life, which starts to be written when we are born.

Many more pages are recorded throughout our lives as we interact with the health system.

Some people have only a few pages in their book and others have many, but each helps to tell a story of their life.

These pages about our health are kept by the person or institution that cared for us. All these pages in all their different locations make up our complete health record.

Information is also collected by the state government, as it has a responsibility to report to the federal government, and to the public, about how the health system is being used. The federal government also collects health information so it can work out where to allocate its funds.

Since the 1970's the government has been collecting information about births, hospital visits, cancer, mental health and deaths.

This information is summary data only, such as numerical codes for major diagnoses and procedures. Used only for research and strategic management, this data is very different from electronic health records.

This wealth of information has been used to better understand the factors that affect the health of Western Australians.

This understanding then helps initiate new health programs and services and also contributes to international knowledge about health.

It was health research that discovered the connection between cancer and cigarette smoking and also how exercise and healthy eating make for happier bodies that live longer.

In Western Australia in the 1980's, important studies were completed about maternal and child health, road injury and cardiac arrest.

At that time it took a lot of work to put together the pieces of information to find out how to improve our health and health services.

In 1995, using start-up funding from the Lotteries Commission, the Data Linkage Unit was set up to provide a single safe place for the directory to this information.

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The unit was created as a partnership between the Department of Health and the University of Western Australia.

The Institute of Child Health Research joined the partnership a few years later, with Curtin University following soon after.

Health consumers help the Department of Health with strategic management of the unit.

To improve the overall health of the population we need to know if all groups of the population are equally healthy and we need to find out how diseases and health problems occur. To do this we link together information about the health events of many people to reveal patterns of cause and effect.

Any such use of health information must be approved by an ethics committee, which have representatives from the community, the clergy and the law as well as from health professionals, and researchers.

When an approved request is received the Data Linkage Unit enables the pieces of information to be put together to create a broad picture. Then investigations can take place into health service needs, better methods of treatment, the effectiveness of new surgery techniques or how to prevent health problems occurring.

One of the reasons the Data Linkage Unit was created was to ensure the information about individuals is kept confidential.

Since it started the use of identified health information has decreased substantially and is continuing to do so.

This is because, instead of actually bringing all the records together, we create an index that is like the contents page of a book within a virtual library of all the health books of everyone in Western Australia.

The information about who we are is then separated from the information about what happened to us, so that it can be used for research while our identities are kept private.

Researchers and planners aren't actually interested in individuals, but they do need to know the difference between something happening twice to one person or once to two people. So assembling the whole picture is important, but they don't usually need to know the identities of the people that the information is about.

Already, linked data has helped health professionals identify the best way to perform health treatments, like gall bladder surgery and kidney stone removal.

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It has been used to improve the health services provided to Western Australians, like improving the treatment and care of the physical illnesses of people whose mental health is being cared for and putting defibrillators in all wards and in all ambulances, so that nurses and ambulance workers can react quickly to cardiac arrests.

Researchers using linked data have discovered such things as the increased risk of birth defects with assisted conception.

Researchers into child health bring together information from their surveys and other health collections to improve the health of our children, and our children's children.

There are many events that happen when we are young that affect our health later in life. Knowing more about these can help to reduce the chances of the health issues recurring in the next generation.

We are now working with other agencies to find out more about all the factors that impact on our ability to lead healthy, productive and happy lives.

We are also helping other states create data linkage units so we can work towards an Australia-wide picture with an aim to improving the lives of all Australians.

We hope you now know who we are and what we do. If you would like to know more about data linkage there is some information on our web site, including a comprehensive research outputs report. Or you can contact us and speak to one of the members of our team. We're also happy to come to your organisation to make a presentation.