

HCF puts lifestyle on the line

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PRIVATE insurer HCF has invested \$100 million in a web-based health management platform that gives members access to personalised support for healthier lifestyle choices as well as tailored care for people with chronic illnesses.

Under the five-year deal with Healthways Australia, a subsidiary of US specialist healthcare support provider Healthways Inc, HCF's 1.3 million members can log on to customised information and tools, with extra support available over the phone.

My Health Guardian offers generally fit members access to health coaches including dieticians, personal trainers and psychologists, together with risk assessment tools and the ability to compile personal health records.

But people living with chronic medical conditions can receive more direct support from nurses working out of a call centre running Healthways' own population health solutions software.

HCF chief executive Terry Smith said participation was entirely voluntary, with services focused on prevention, education, behavioural change and evidence-based medicine.

"Our investment will be offset by savings achieved from having a healthier membership," he said.

Healthways director Craig Bosworth said the initial response had been very positive, with some 25,000 HCF members recently hospitalised due to their illnesses taking up an invitation to join the care program.

Mr Bosworth said the aim was not to take the place of a person's GP or pharmacist.

"People will gain most benefit over time, as our software allows us to identify when risk factors may change and we can get in early to suggest appropriate health strategies," he said.

Call centre features such as prompts to ring patients at agreed times and intervals, and automatic provision of histories helped staff to direct conversations and assess outcomes.

Mr Bosworth said all personal health information was held by Healthways, and no data was made available to HCF.

"Potential candidates for the initial tranche were identified by HCF through billing which indicated a hospitalisation, but there is a steel wall between the health information we hold and HCF's membership and billing details," he said.

"In Australia, even if they had that information, insurers cannot use it for their business practices -- they can't do risk-rating, or prevent people joining, as is the case in the US."

Healthways signed up with Macquarie Hosting, which already boasts a suite of e-health clients.

"We signed the contract in November and were live in May, which is quite phenomenal for a start-up of this size," Mr Bosworth said.