

MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian-first technology initiative a shot in the arm for health research

Faster, more comprehensive answers to Australia's most pressing health questions are now within the grasp of researchers following the launch of an innovative \$4million public-good technology initiative in Sydney today.

SURE – the Secure Unified Research Environment – is Australia's first high-performance "virtual computing environment" designed specifically for health researchers to securely access, store and rapidly analyse anonymised health information brought together from sources such as hospitals, cancer registries, clinical trials, general practice, and research studies.

"Australia has one of the most comprehensive collections of population-based health information in the world but analysing big sets of data requires more advanced and powerful technology," said Sax Institute Principal Scientist Professor Louisa Jorm.

"SURE will make it infinitely easier for researchers from different institutions around the country and internationally to work together remotely on large-scale projects, using this important information."

Using anonymised linked data to join the dots between disparate sources of health information is widely regarded as the key to efficiently researching major health issues such as population ageing, diabetes, obesity and mental health. Harnessing the power of linked health information can also help build better health systems because we can find out more about how they work.

But until now, researchers using linked health information have done so through their own computing networks, many of which have technical limitations. This has limited their ability to tap into rich information sources such as those routinely collected by health services and researchers working on cohort studies and clinical trials.

SURE's powerful computing environment will greatly improve the process of accessing and analysing linked health data, allowing researchers to make better use of Australia's unique large-scale data resources. They will be able to conduct their studies more quickly and focus on providing timely answers that can be used in developing health policies and programs.

SURE will also mean that information is stored in one highly secure location, rather than multiple locations, during the course of a research project. Strict accreditation procedures and ethics approvals will apply to researchers using it, and each study within the facility will exist within its own security perimeter so there is no chance of data being exchanged between studies.

Careful scrutiny and an audit trail of files entering and leaving SURE, multiple firewalls and no access to the internet, printers or removable media within the facility, are just some of the other security features.

SURE has been developed by the Sax Institute with funding from the Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy and the Education Investment Fund Super Science Initiative. It has also received NSW Government funding and forms part of the Population Health Research Network (PHRN), an Australian Government initiative to build technology infrastructure needed to support the use of linked health data and ultimately drive improvements to health services.

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