

## Doctors give tick to centralisation

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A Citrix-based solution allows a variety of regional health-care units to share data efficiently, writes Jeanne-Vida Douglas.

Much is made of the tyranny of distance in the Australian business landscape. In fact creating fast and secure connections between offices in state capitals, or even to remote locations, is a rite of passage for just about any aspiring chief information officer.

The challenge becomes somewhat greater however, when attempting to create connections between regional centres, because in many cases the high-speed backbones simply aren't available. This was the task faced by the information systems officer for the Mater Mercy Health and Aged Care service in Rockhampton, Marcia Healy.

Encompassing five hospitals, a day-care unit, four aged-care facilities as well as a linen and food service, Healy's territory extends from Bundaberg to Mackay, 7 1/2 hours' drive north along the Bruce Highway.

In 2002 Healy set out to consolidate the administration databases and patient information systems, which were spread across a series of AS400 boxes. While each was using the same software, the only way to transfer data was to pick up the phone and dictate down the line. As each system had evolved its own particular quirks, health-care providers working between different sites needed to learn the quirks of each system and re-enter data every time they changed location.

"The final catalyst for the systems overhaul was end of life issues with the hardware and the systems," Healy says. "We were always aware of the need to improve the quality of our information gathering so that we could run things more efficiently."

"We opted for a new patient management system from iSOFT, and they were the ones who suggested we consider pushing it out to the sites using Citrix," Healy explains.

However, completely centralising the administration systems would also cause a handful of part-time IT staff spread throughout the state to be replaced with a centralised team and help desk, and Healy was keen to head off a potential user backlash.

"We needed to show we'd be able to provide really good service in order to gain end user support, so we made every effort to give help desk calls our undivided attention," Healy says. "Basically, so long as the staff felt their needs were being responded to and resolved there wouldn't be a problem."

Meanwhile, back at Rockhampton, corporate managers soon became the project's most enthusiastic supporters. Not only was the new configuration less expensive to run than the previous system, it was also vastly more efficient.

"Instead of duplicating business services at each facility, and re-entering data at every location, information was always available at every site, and managers were able to access information when they needed it, rather than having to rely on other people," Healy says. "Having it all in the same building also allowed us to centralise our maintenance, and provide better benchmarking and more consistent reporting."

Not only did this initial centralisation provide a launching pad for a range of technologies, it also provided the basis for the organisation to streamline its core business processes.

The Citrix-based approach was extended after a systems upgrade in 2005 to include a range of new applications, as well as an overhaul of the access gateway, and the implementation of a disaster recovery solution.

Healy is now using the same remote access principle to deliver a web-based clinical information system to doctors, as well as a risk management and incident reporting solution, as a result of clustered web servers installed in 2006.

"Initially, it had only implemented Citrix for our patient management, and financial systems, but it was so effective in streamlining the administration, and providing reliable remote access that we just kept going," Healy says. "When we do our next refresh we'll be increasing the number of Citrix servers, and moving more applications across."

But thin-client technology isn't Healy's only tactic, when it comes to making the most of Queensland's scarce broadband resource.

Over the next 12 months, Healy is looking to replace paper-based records in the Mercy's aged-care facilities with a web-based iCare clinical information system, and is looking to improve the efficiency of the underlying systems through server virtualisation.

"Getting the doctors to use the clinical information system in the hospitals was a matter of making it an effective system to use, but getting staff from the aged-care facilities to use computers will be a whole different challenge, many of them have never used a computer before," Healy says. "It's a whole change-management challenge, we want to give people the confidence to know they can use it, and they usually know more than they think they know, it's just a matter of getting people to recognise their own abilities."