Soap Box

“The computer will see /hear/probe you now”- A proactive approach to technology in rural communities

Rural communities have been the beneficiary of a number of amazing technological innovations. In an environment where proximate resources in terms of skilled health professionals and infrastructure are lower than in metropolitan areas, an understanding of the thirst and capacity of communities to accept and benefit from the technology revolution is essential. High rates of acceptability of technology characterise rural communities. The use of digital communications and the saturation of smart phones in rural and remote settings is widespread. Yet, more technological advances are on the horizon and how will they impact rural health?

3D printers will soon print out “spare parts” that are customised to individual needs. The skills set of our current medical professionals will need to change rapidly to accommodate robotic and hands free approaches often at a distance. Are rural health professionals ready for this? Are educators acknowledging the changing competencies and activities that will be required?

Applications such as standalone computerised decision support tools operated by consumers and bypassing health professionals are being trialled. This is occurring without health impact assessments or discussion about the wider impacts of online interactions in lieu of current models of face to face consulting Consequent health related outcomes for rural communities and those with lower rates of health literacy are not being studied. This talk seeks to consider the likely uses of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the scale of potential change and the possible impacts that an Uber disruption to health care in rural communities might bring and what response is required.

So….”resistance is futile”-It’s time for doctors, and other health professionals, to partner with consumers, governments and “smart things” people to make AI health applications and “virtual reality” a reality underpinned by core values that reflect a vision for the future where the healthcare of rural and remote Australians is “smart” in more ways than one