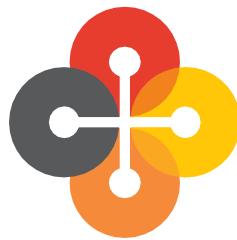# Guidelines for selecting health apps

What are apps?

Apps are pieces of computer software (applications) that allow people to customise their smartphone or tablet. Some apps (e.g. calendars and calculators) come preloaded on smartphones and others (e.g. National public toilet map) can be downloaded from an app store e.g. iTunes or Google Play (Australian Government). Apps can range from simple diaries or reminders to more complex programs certified by health authorities as medical devises.

In 2017 there were 325,000 mobile apps available that were targeted at people's health and health behaviours (Pohl, 2017). It has been estimated that more than 75,000 new apps are being developed every year (medium.com). The app market is lightly regulated and this has the potential to cause harm to patients. Whilst the potential for benefit is significant, patient safety must be paramount.

Guidelines

1.   Use or recommend previously reviewed apps

In the first instance consider using one of the apps already rated by Vic Health https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/vichealth-apps/healthy-living-apps. This website is managed by VicHealth, Australia and comprises reviews of apps promoting good health – apps focused on nutrition, fitness, smoking cessation, alcohol tracking and mental wellbeing. More than 300 healthy living apps have been reviewed.

2.   Undertake an independent app review

If the app you would like to use or recommend is not on the Vic Health website, review the app using the Mobile App Rating Scale (MARS).

The MARS scale is a well-known standardised tool developed by the Queensland University of Technology by which health apps can be compared. It is designed to score apps on the criteria of engagement, functionality, aesthetics, and information quality. An overall functionality score out of five is derived using this scale. The MARS scale can be found here

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3. Include consumers/patients in the review

As well as determining consumer opinion on the apps engagement, aesthetics and functionality, consumer beliefs, values and understanding of data use should be considered when recommending an app. Consumers may need help in understanding privacy statements and end user agreements. Considerations may include:

Storage and privacy:
- Is there a publicly available privacy statement/policy?
- Where the data is stored (on the phone or is it available to others via other social media, monitored by other agencies or available to secondary users).
- How secure is the storage and privacy of the data?
- Who can access the data i.e. is the information shared or sold-on to a secondary party?
- Who owns the data? Check if there is an end user agreement.

Costs and advertising:
- Whether the app download is a one-off or an ongoing purchase, and whether it requires add-ons to use the app.
- Is there in-app advertising?
- Are there in-app purchases i.e. product purchases made within the app such as extra features e.g. unlocking additional videos, or removing ads?

Social media
- Is the app integrated with social media i.e. allows sharing to Facebook, Twitter, other social media channels?
- Is there an associated app community?

For further information about apps and privacy visit: https://www.oaic.gov.au/agencies-and-organisations/app-guidelines/

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