

# The new waiting room without the wait

There has been a significant growth in the trend of booking GP appointments online and websites such as HealthEngine are capitalising on it

Nearly a third of Australians who have recently moved are turning to the Internet to find a new doctor, according to a survey from Australia's largest online booking system and health marketplace, HealthEngine.

The trend has fuelled the growth of online health directory and booking services, empowering patients with a more convenient way to book and manage their health appointments.

With over 80 per cent of the Australian population now online, GP practices are starting to understand the value of online health services to their business and are reaping the rewards.

According to the survey, close to 20 per cent of consumers left their regular practice because they didn't offer online bookings. A further one in 10 said that if they didn't book online they would have gone to their local emergency department.

GP and HealthEngine CEO, Dr Marcus Tan, said this increasing trend marks a significant shift in the way primary health is delivered.

"GP practices need to start playing in this space to ensure

that all Australians are able to access fast and appropriate medical advice.

"We have already seen a circa 150 per cent growth in online bookings over the past 12 months and this is only going to

continue to increase," said Dr Tan, who is also an AMA (WA) Council Member.

HealthEngine is forecasting to grow to over 2000 GP Practices over the next 12 months. With over 600,000 monthly visitors and over four million appointments already published, the service is rapidly increasing its national footprint every month.

The company has also attracted the attention of major investors and last year benefited from a \$10.4 million boost from Telstra and Seven West Media.

HealthEngine is currently offering GP Access Grants of up to \$2000 to select practices

in areas where identifiable gaps in the market exist. The grant aims to bring the benefits of HealthEngine to practices in a risk-free way whilst also increasing the number of available appointments patients can find and book in their local area. ■



**Full steam ahead:** Dr Marcus Tan plans to grow HealthEngine's coverage to over 2000 GP Practices over the next 12 months.

# Q&A *Medicus* asked GP and HealthEngine CEO, Dr Marcus Tan, about the growing trend in online GP appointments and how HealthEngine is securing its position in the space

## **Q. When was the HealthEngine website launched?**

HealthEngine was originally founded as an online health directory in 2006 by some Perth-based Emergency Physicians. In late 2009, I was introduced to the original founders who had built up the directory as an asset but didn't have a business. I acquired HealthEngine's assets in 2010 and turned it into the business it is today, including the appointment booking and marketplace aspect of the business that didn't exist prior to 2012. The original founders effectively became silent partners in this new business.

## **Q. How pleased are you with the success of HealthEngine in this short span of time?**

We have been humbled by the recognition within the tech startup sector as a local success story and to be recently awarded with a Rising Star award by *WA Business News*. We are a proudly West Australian company created and led by WA doctors which has certainly come a long way having grown over 1000 per cent in the last few years and are thrilled to be a trusted site used by millions of Australians every year. Whilst we are pleased with our success thus far, we know there is always more that can be done and don't plan to rest on our laurels.

## **Q. What prompted you to establish a website such as HealthEngine?**

The site has always been about helping patients navigate the complex health system and solve one of the key problems of finding the right care at the right place at the right time. There were plenty of challenges early on – finding practices that saw what we were trying to do and we are very grateful to those visionary practices that took a chance with us at the beginning and continue to support us. There were lots of people who didn't believe there were any available appointments with GPs (especially in WA), but in the next 12 months, we expect to offer over 6 million available appointments for patients to book nationally.

## **Q. Do you believe GPs are getting the message that an online booking presence is valuable to both the surgery and patient?**

We have seen an unprecedented uptake in online bookings by GPs and the broader health sector including dentists and allied health providers over the last 12 months. We know patients are even changing practices because their previous practice didn't offer online bookings. I think most practices understand that this is the way of the future and online bookings will become a standard way for patients to access practices as a potentially more convenient and less time consuming alternative to a phone call.

## **Q. What feedback have you received from GP surgeries who have signed up to HealthEngine?**

Many GPs have been pleasantly surprised by how many patients they receive from HealthEngine and the load it takes off their front desk. They have been very complimentary about the professional support and customer service they receive and the reliability, flexibility and ease of use of the system. Patients have also been very positive about being able to find and book available health appointments online.

## **Q. What prompted you to open HealthEngine to investors such as Seven West Media and Telstra?**

Seven West Media and Telstra view the health industry as an important part of their futures and collectively came to us because they had identified HealthEngine as one of the largest consumer health sites in Australia and wanted to invest. As Australia's largest media and telecommunications companies, we were attracted by the credibility and resources they brought to HealthEngine and their commitment to helping us become a market-leading Australian internet site in the mould of Realestate.com.au, Carsales.com.au and Seek. Whilst we are in a strong cash position, we are currently raising more capital to further accelerate the growth of the company and would welcome new investors, particularly those that have strong links to the health sector.

## **Q. What plans do you have for HealthEngine over the next 12 months?**

We intend to continue to grow the number of Australian practices and patients using HealthEngine and add some exciting new features to our online booking system and site. We are firmly committed to ensuring the Australian market gets the best possible experience but there are certainly some interesting opportunities in Asia and other parts of the world and we will explore those more deeply when the time is right.

## **Q. Do you see yourself more as a doctor or an entrepreneur?**

Medical entrepreneurship has always been viewed a little negatively, in some cases not unfairly, but I've always viewed entrepreneurship as being more about innovation and value creation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, given the pressures on the healthcare system to deliver increasing value and be more cost efficient, I think it's important that doctors recognise the value in being a bit more entrepreneurial in that sense. I'm fortunate that HealthEngine is a platform that assists patients and the industry as a whole and doesn't require me to compromise my clinical and professional standards to derive an income. Although I don't see as many patients nowadays as I used to, I think it's important to have patient contact to stay in touch with the coalface and am glad to still be able to practise. I'm a proud member of the medical profession and don't think I will ever not see myself as a doctor first and foremost. ■