



It's time to modernise Australia's birth registration system

Having a birth certificate is a key to citizenship and many take it for granted that they can use it to prove they are Australian and a lawful citizen.

But a number of Australians – predominantly Indigenous people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities – miss out on the benefits of citizenship, are precluded from accessing the full range of political and economic rights, and struggle to fully participate in society, all because their birth was never registered. Or if it was, they cannot produce a birth certificate to prove it.

To register a birth in Australia, parents must fill out and sign a paper form and either mail it to the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM), or take it in person to the registry office in the capital city. Or if in Victoria, to one of the regional Justice Centres. All going well, several weeks later, parents will receive their child's birth certificate in the mail.

In this age of increasing connectivity, where few people don't have access to a mobile phone, tablet or computer, it is appropriate to ask whether there is a better way of registering births and issuing birth certificates.

Digital birth registration

Several African countries are leading the way in managing the birth registration process online. For example, Uganda has birth registration services in hospitals which enable mothers to register the birth of their child immediately after delivery, or when they return to have immunisation or health check-ups for their children. The birth registration information is sent to a web-based application linked to a government database. After verification by a hospital administrative officer, an official birth certificate is printed at the hospital and presented to the parents. The entire process is completed in minutes, rather than weeks.

So why has Australia not yet moved to digital birth registration? Shifting to an online system is being explored, but security and fraud concerns mean a cautious approach is being adopted.

In some ways this is understandable. After all, birth certificates are the core document for acquiring proof of identity documents, including driver's licenses and passports. The potential for fraud would be an obvious risk to national and personal security.

However, these concerns about security must be balanced with the need for universal birth registration. Although, overall, Australia has high levels of birth registration, a significant proportion of unregistered births are occurring within Indigenous communities.

Unregistered birth in Indigenous communities

Making the birth registration system more accessible and user-friendly would help to address low rates of birth registration. If an online system were available in Australian hospitals, as in Uganda, we could ensure that all babies would be registered within days of

being born and, ideally, that mums go home with their baby and their child's birth certificate in hand.

Such reforms would also assist with Australia's compliance with the human right to birth registration as set out in Article 24 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Indeed the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that it is:

[C]oncerned about the difficulties faced by Aboriginal persons in relation to birth registration. In particular, the Committee is concerned that obstacles to birth registration arising from poor literacy levels, the lack of understanding of the requirements and advantages of a birth registration as well as inadequacies in the support provided by authorities have not been resolved. The Committee further notes with concern that a birth certificate is subject to administrative costs, posing an additional hindrance for persons in economically disadvantaged situations.

The Committee urges the State party to review its birth registration process in detail to ensure that all children born in Australia are registered at birth, and that no child is disadvantaged due to procedural barriers to registration, including by raising awareness among the Aboriginal population on the importance of birth registration and providing special support to facilitate birth registration for illiterate persons. It further urges the State party to issue birth certificates upon the birth of a child and for free.

Paper or plastic?

Finally, it should be noted that birth registration is not the only part of the system that needs to be modernised.

We can also learn a lot from Canada when it comes to birth certificates. Canadians realised that producing a document as important as a birth certificate on a flimsy piece of paper was not ideal. In that form it can be easily ripped (e.g. by a curious toddler), ruined (e.g. by repeated folding to fit in a person's wallet) and is generally not in a durable form. This was evident from the large number of requests Canadian BDM registries received each year for replacement birth certificates.

Ironically, the solution that Canada came up with involves Australian technology. They now produce birth certificates on the plastic that we use to make our bank notes. If the Canadians have found the material that we use for our currency to be suitable for birth certificates, surely we should explore doing the same?

It is time for Australia's birth registration system to be brought into the 21st Century. Embracing innovative digital technology in this sector is long overdue. Implementation of such reform would ensure that all Australians are able to access the birth registration system and obtain a birth certificate, not just those who are part of mainstream society

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