

Briefing Note for the Member Forum 07 August 2024

Proposal to increase the maximum limit of Description lengths

Purpose

SNOMED International proposes to increase the maximum potential length of Fully Specified Name and Synonym descriptions from 255 characters to 4096 characters. The requirement for this change has come predominantly from the work on the Pharmaceutical / biologic product hierarchy, where the terming guidance for FSNs may cause the current limit to be exceeded where there is a large number of ingredients in a medicinal product, which is particularly common in multivalent vaccines. However, due to the potential for this to be required in other hierarchies and across the world, we would be applying the changes to all SNOMED International products, including the [International Edition](#), [Managed Service extensions](#), and all [derivative products](#).

There is some likelihood that implementers will have hardcoded database schemas to 255 characters, so a significant lead time is proposed before this change would take effect. **The current proposal would be for the changes to be implemented in late 2025.**

It is important to note that there is absolutely no intention to increase the length of a multitude of the International Descriptions. The proposal is simply to increase the maximum possible size to 4096, in order to allow a small number of necessarily longer terms to be consumed. However, the vast majority of Descriptions will remain at their current length, well below 255 characters.

Introduction

The [RF2 Specification for SNOMED CT Descriptions](#) states that the overall length limit for a description is 32Kb (understood to be Kilobits), equating to 4096 single byte characters. This maximum length is then further restricted on a *per description type* basis, as specified in the Description Type Refset (specifically: "to a maximum length, configurable for each [description type](#) as defined in the [900000000000538005 | Description format reference set](#) | member associated with that [description type](#) - see the [Description Format Reference Set](#) specifications document for more details."

At the October 2023 SNOMED International Business Meetings, the Modeling Advisory Group discussed a proposal (that had been brought up by the Editorial AG in response to Drug project and Member requirements) to increase the limit for Fully Specified Name (FSN) and Synonym Descriptions from the current 255 characters, up to 4096 characters. The proposal would bring these two description types into line with the existing limit for the Text Definition description type. This type of change has already been successfully implemented in various extensions; for example in Australia (where the limit was increased to 2048), and in the latest release of the New Zealand Managed Service extension. The latter featured a concept with a description of length 331 characters, and so the DescriptionType value in the NZ extension was increased to 4096 as an interim measure until the International limit could be similarly increased.

The Modeling Group agreed that this change would be within the specification of RF2 just by increasing the size specified in the Description Type reference set. However, this change may have an impact on

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implementers who may have created data storage structures that are not dynamically sized based on the values in the Description Type file.

*Please see the [SNOMED International Proposal to Increase Description Length Limit](#) consultation for full details of the *Background, Rationale, Previous Discussions & Technical Proposal*.*

Next Steps

As the concern is predominantly for impact to end implementers, it is important for us to understand how this change might affect these users, and how we can support them. SNOMED International therefore requests that users of SNOMED CT provide feedback on this proposal via [this form](#).

SNOMED International will respond to feedback received - on this page - until the end of this consultation exercise on **31 December 2024**. As previously mentioned, the current proposal would be for the changes to be implemented in late 2025.

Andrew Atkinson, 2024-08-07