Computer systems can help revolutionise your practice, but where do you start? **Peter Fyne** provides a guide for the uninitiated.

An introduction to practice computing

Dental practice systems have developed extensively over the past few years. For those practices that have not yet computerised, it is well worth considering purchasing the necessary equipment and software. But many practice staff ask, where do we start?

Looking at the computer hardware should be your first priority. 'Hardware' refers to the physical elements of the computer system, such as the monitor, keyboard, disks, CD drives and printers. Hardware also refers to modem(s) and ISDN lines (broad-band) that facilitate electronic communication outside the practice.

Software is the next most important purchase. The software is the computer program that enables the computer hardware to work. The operating system that allows the computer to function often comes with the computer hardware (for example Windows or Linux) but on top of this it will

be necessary to purchase application software. Application software programs have a specific function, such as word processing, spreadsheets,

databases, e-mail and presentation software. Such programs will help you with the day-to-day running of your practice (see box for details.)

There are also specific dental software programs available that are tailored for the dental practice. Some dental systems are approved by the DPB to transmit NHS claims forms electronically. These suppliers are listed on the DPB website: http://www.dpb.nhs.uk/other/edi_supply.shtm. There is a partial reimbursement for computer expenses for dentists who are not yet submitting claims electronically. The DPB will grant a practitioner £900 for this purpose. Contact the DPB for more information about how to access this money.

Payment claims and prior approval requests can be sent to the DPB using a modem connected to the Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) link. This payment system is quick, avoids the use of forms and also avoids sending claims through the post.

Some dental software packages also enable automatic schedule reconciliation. Other utility software will also be required, for example an anti-virus program, a system for performing back-ups (such as a CD-burner and associated software), and a firewall if you are going to link to the Internet.

Besides the general software available it is also possible to purchase specific packages that have been developed for certain dental specialties, for example orthodontics, periodontics or endodontics. Other additional functional software may include recording information from intra-oral cameras, digital radiography and the incorporation of the British National Formulary.

Once you start storing personal data on your computer you must comply with the Data Protection Act. Dental practices should have a data protection policy and a copy of this should be given to both new and existing patients. Practice confidentiality and security policies are also required.

Finally, consideration needs to be given to staff training - so everyone

feels comfortable using the system. Training is sometimes included with specialist packages; otherwise training can be provided on site or at specialist training schools.

The BDA advice sheets *A15: An introduction to practice computing* and *B2: Data protection* are available from the BDA Shop at www.bdashop.com

For further information from The Dental Practice Board for England and Wales email helpdesk @dpb.nhs.uk or telephone: (01323) 433550.

Why invest in a computer?

It will improve administration.

Computers can be used to book appointments, find lost appointments, provide you with an automated recall system, give you word processing facilities, etc. If the practice has a website with an email address this will allow patients to contact you via email, and enable you to contact them.

It will provide management/financial control through the use of spreadsheets and databases. For example, assisting in the management of patient fees, stock control, and practice accounting.

It will help with clinical functions. For example, tooth charting, storage of medical and dental records and treatment plans can all be recorded electronically. Clinical packages can also help to demonstrate to patients via graphics and pictures the type of treatment being proposed.

The NHS is in the midst of one of the biggest IT upgrades in the history of healthcare, the NHS National programme for Information Technology (NPfIT). See our article on page 54 for details.

NHS IT strategy and dentistry

The NHS's ambitious IT upgrade programme will ultimately benefit dental practice, reports **Andrew Hoy**.

The NHS is almost halfway into what some have called the most ambitious Information Technology upgrade in the history of healthcare, the NHS National programme for Information Technology (NPfIT). Before too long we hope that the benefits of this will begin to be felt at the level of individual dental practices.

The NHS's decade-long programme, which began in 2000, is intended to create a nationwide system that would reach every corner of the NHS, including dentistry. In the next three years alone, there will be an investment of £2.3 billion in IT. In the long run, however, the government hopes that the new system will reduce costs - while also streamlining administration and improving patient care.

NHS IT strategy

More specifically, of the long-term changes envisaged by the NHS over the remaining six years of the plan are:

- Electronic appointment booking - an online National Bookings Service (E-booking)
- Electronic care records service - an online National Health Record Service - live patient records that all health professionals in whatever setting, including dental practices, can access.
- Electronic transmission of prescriptions - online management and transmission of prescriptions
- Fast, reliable underlying IT infrastructure - broadband access for all NHS clinicians and support staff and improved bandwidth on the NHS national network.

An integrated care record would be a huge

improvement to the current system, where many NHS trusts use multiple separate IT systems in separate care environments, such as dental practices, each with their own unlinked patient records.

Dental IT announcements

In line with the strategy detailed above, dentists will eventually have connectivity to the NHS network, and access to integrated dental care records. To implement these records, NHS numbers may be an important patient identifier in the new framework. Under one part of the dental IT strategy, a patient's NHS number will be added automatically to the clinical records held by GPs by the National Tracing Service when patient data is transmitted to the DPB. Also, e-booking will allow dentists to book patients into secondary care (such as oral surgery) at the time of referral.

Additional dentistry specific initiatives include a process to ensure that dental IT

packages remain able to connect to the wider NHS IT system; and the piloting of a new web-based Electronic Data Exchange (EDI) system, to transfer Eastbourne data.

There was a funding announcement of £30 million in September 2003 for the purpose of integrating dentistry into the system, although no detail on how this will be spent has been received.

Upcoming issues for practices

Training in any new system will be necessary for all practices. Companies who develop systems under contract to the NHS will be expected to develop training for staff, and NHS Strategic Health Authorities and PCTs will be expected to organise and pay for its delivery to staff using it - with compensation to practices to cover staff time.

The BDA continues to monitor developments, and is involved in working groups assisting in the project.

Further information

Web: www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/InformationTechnology.

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