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 Informational 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 GDPs 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.

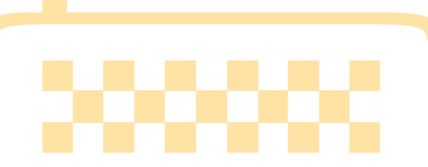Additional dentistry specific initiatives include a process to ensure that dental IT packages remain able to connect to the wider NHS IT system; and the piloting of a new web-based Electronic Data Exchange (EDI) system, to transfer Eastbourne data.

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

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