

EHealth: Right systems, Right tools, Right skills

Get it Right - RIGHT SKILLS

World-class health services cannot be achieved without a proper infrastructure for information management and technology. EHealth has the potential to transform healthcare delivery and nursing practice in ways that will directly benefit patient care, and will also provide the information necessary for resource management and service planning. Whether it actually does so will depend on how systems are designed, and how they are implemented; the single most important factor in realising the potential of eHealth is the people who use it. Since nurses will be major users of these technologies (as the largest profession employed by the NHS and most involved in direct patient care) front-line nurses must be fully involved in and prepared for these developments.

RCN Wales uses the term 'eHealth' to refer to all applications of information communication technologies in healthcare. Telemedicine/telehealth facilities provided in surgeries or community hospitals enable patients to access specialist services for diagnosis and consultation without having to travel to secondary or tertiary care hospitals; telecare enables monitoring and self care for people with chronic conditions and enables frail elderly people to continue living in their own homes or other supported environments, avoiding admission to hospital; telephone consultation, such as NHS Direct, can encourage self-care and can reduce (although never replace) the need for home visits and therefore the time spent on travel by community nurses; electronic patient records improve patient safety and continuity of care by making information about patients available at any point of care and can provide the data for resource management and

planning.

However, all these facilities require up-front investment in infrastructure, appropriate hardware (i.e. mobile devices for mobile staff such as community nurses), appropriate software (which includes nursing as well as medical content), and education.

The RCN has published standards for the nursing content of electronic patient records, and a simple "benchmarking" tool to assess whether systems and technologies are "SAFER" i.e. that they conform to Standards, that they are Acceptable to nurses and patients, that they are Fit for purpose (i.e. that they support nursing practice as well as medical practice since the two are qualitatively different), they are Evidence based and are Risk managed during development, deployment and use in practice.

To realise the potential of eHealth, there needs to be full involvement of nurses in these developments, investment in appropriate hardware to ensure access by mobile and community based staff, and much greater investment in education and training for nurses at all levels.

KEY POLICY ACTIONS

- The Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that Informing Healthcare incorporates RCN standards in the systems being introduced across Wales.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that the development of eHealth is included into the performance targets of NHS health organisations.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that appropriate hardware devices are available for mobile and community staff.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that all NHS nurses receive adequate and appropriate eHealth education and training.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that NHS health organisations have a named post of Informatics Nurse who can act as focus and resource for other nurses.

