



Royal College
of Nursing

Make IT SAFE

Information for nursing staff
using computers and information
technology in their clinical practice



Make IT SAFE

Whenever you use something for the first time, it always makes sense to check the item is safe and that it works.

It's the same with computer systems and other types of information technology in healthcare. Computers are widely used in clinical environments, and new systems such as electronic patient records and electronic prescriptions are currently being developed which support the care that nursing staff provide.

This technology has the potential to improve both the quality of care that patients and clients receive and the flow of information between clinical teams.

But there are also risks. Any technology must first be subjected to rigorous assessment and testing before it is incorporated into patients and clients' care.

All systems and the way they are used must be SAFE. Safe for nurses and safe for patients. When people's health and safety and the confidentiality of their personal information are at stake, this quality assurance is vital.

This summary guide has been produced by the Royal College of Nursing to help you assess the safety and effectiveness of systems that have been or will be introduced into your area of clinical practice.



Making sure systems are SAFE

If nursing staff are to use computer systems when caring for patients and clients, they have to be sure – and their organisations must take steps to ensure they know – they are SAFE.

Systems and the way they are used must:

S Conform to **STANDARDS**

A Be **ACCEPTABLE** to patients, clients, carers and health professionals

F Be **FIT** for purpose and practice

E Be supported by **EVIDENCE**

Standards

From NMC guidance on record keeping to health departments' guidance on consent for information sharing, most aspects of working with information are covered by standards.

A number of standards have already been developed by the RCN for the safe and effective use of information and information/communication technologies. For example, guidance on text messaging services is available for nurses working with children and young people (Publication Code 003 035). There are competencies for information sharing in nursing (Publication code 003 082). The RCN is also developing a position statement on the content of electronic records.

You need to be sure you know what the standards are when it comes to data protection, telephone consultation, the use of email for communicating patient information and so on.

The content of electronic patient records and the way the system works will not necessarily reflect the way nurses use paper records. But they must still conform to professional standards. Nurses must be able to record all aspects of nursing practice and electronic systems should use recognised nursing terms.

Acceptable

Most patients and members of the public recognise the value of IT in healthcare and are willing to have information shared electronically to support their safety and improve the continuity of their care.

However, not everyone trusts computers. Some people are unwilling to have private information about themselves stored or shared electronically.

Nurses are well placed to ensure that patients are empowered to question the use of computers in their care and the way that information is held about them or shared.

Systems and the way they are used must also be acceptable to nurses and other healthcare professionals. For example, do they fit with professional values and support team working? If your team values include partnership working with patients/clients and client held records, the systems you use should not introduce barriers to this way of working. Well designed systems should improve the delivery of patient focused, evidence based care and treatment.

FIT for purpose and practice

Evidence from pilot tests and live use will indicate whether an IT system such as a cardiac monitor or electronic prescribing system is fit for the purpose for which it was designed.

But the system must also fit with practice – in other words, it has to suit the way people work and the environments in which care is delivered.

For example, there must be an adequate number of computers on a ward or for staff who are more mobile. There must be robust and reliable access to systems for people who work out in the community, and the technology they use must be portable. Training schemes should be designed and provided with the needs of clinical staff firmly in mind. Even the amount of time it takes to ‘log-in’ to a system should be considered.

Properly designed computer systems can lead to better ways of working. In those cases, some changes to working practices can be expected.

It is important to remember that the development of systems can often be incremental. For example, a particular piece of software may only be the first phase of a longer term plan. The system you use at first may need to be modified or added to in order to fully support your work.

If you have concerns, consider whether they are to do with having to change the way you work rather than a fault with the system or the way it is being implemented.

Of course, the change you are experiencing may be clinically unacceptable or potentially unsafe, in which case you will need to prepare a risk assessment, an adverse incident report or impact assessment with the help of your line manager.

Risk management and patient safety processes should be no different when IT is the issue than for any other aspect of health care.

Evidence

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines evidence-based technology in the following way:

“Health technologies are evidence based when they meet well-defined specifications and have been validated through controlled clinical studies or rest on a widely accepted consensus by experts.”

Any new system used in healthcare must have been developed with evidence.

And any one who approves systems for clinical use in an organisation should carry out an evaluation before they are introduced to assure themselves and the staff operating them that they meet the above criteria.

It's not good enough to test and pilot a system in one area. There must be an assessment of the benefits and risks in each place that it will be used, as part of an IT implementation plan.

As a nurse, you should know what the risk management plan is for any system introduced in your area of work. This will tell you who to contact if you have concerns so that lessons can be learnt and new evidence developed.

Reporting problems

If you believe a system or the way it is used does not meet the SAFE criteria outlined in this leaflet, please report your concerns immediately to either your line manager, your Director of Nursing or your Director of IT.

The RCN would like to know if you have concerns about the systems you are using. If you have information that can support our work, please email makeitsafe@rcn.org.uk.

Checklist

When a new system is being introduced, ask yourself these questions:

- Has the software been designed with my clinical practice in mind?
- Have nursing staff been involved in the system's development?
- Have I received the right training to use this new system?
- Is there evidence that this system works?
- Are there enough machines available for my team and others to use?
- Do I understand the risks associated with using this technology?
- What processes are in place for ensuring any concerns about the system or the way it is used are addressed?

Get involved

The Royal College of Nursing supports the overall direction of travel of the e-Health programmes in each of the four UK countries.

We support the introduction of electronic patient records for example.

However, the single most important factor in realising the potential of IT in health care is the people who use it.

For that, there has to be clinical engagement.

Resources must be put into ensuring that nurses understand e-Health, and into training, support and facilitation so that implementation is well managed and successful.

Steps must also be taken to involve nursing staff in the development of new systems. This is already happening, but we want more nurses to be more involved. For this, we need nurse leaders at all levels to know how to champion IT implementation and ensure that the organisational context is supportive of change and ways of working with IT.

If you would like to be an “IT champion”, visit the RCN Information in Nursing Forum’s Online Community at www.rcn.org.uk/information

Further reading

RCN (2006) *Putting Information at the Heart of Nursing Care* (Publication code 003 039)

RCN (2006) *An integrated career and competency framework for information sharing in nursing practice* (Publication code 003 082). Please note this publication is currently under review.

All documents are available to download in PDF format from www.rcn.org.uk/publications.

The Royal College of Nursing is also developing a section on its website that will provide you with more information about e-Health issues.





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