

IT AND PATIENT SAFETY: WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR THE NHS?

24th October 2006

Wilson Room, 6.00-7.00pm

Portcullis House, Westminster

Overview

Connecting for Health, the programme aimed at modernising the NHS computer database, has been running for more than three years. It is the most ambitious computer project in the world and represents the largest single investment in IT in the UK. The system aims to connect over 30,000 GPs in England to almost 300 hospitals, giving clinicians and patients access to their personal health and care information.

In 2006 the National Audit Office (NAO) conducted a full examination of the programme to date and reported the results to parliament in June 2006. The report was generally supportive of the way the system has been procured and said that errors made in previous nationwide IT systems had been avoided. Although the report made no conclusions as to whether the system will be good value for money, there has been significant debate around increases in predicted costs and delays in the system's nationwide rollout.

This meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Patient Safety aimed to discuss issues surrounding the Connecting for Health programme and to consider more broadly how IT solutions can best benefit NHS patients and practitioners.

Speakers were:

- Nigel Hawkes CBE, Health Editor, The Times
- Andy Burnham MP, Minister of State, Department of Health
- Dr Hamish Meldrum, Chairman, General Practitioners Committee, British Medical Association

Dr Howard Stoaite MP, Chair of the group, opened the meeting by giving a brief introduction on the Connecting for Health programme. Dr Stoaite MP stated that he hoped the meeting would provide an opportunity to explore some of the key issues around IT in the NHS and patient safety.

Nigel Hawkes CBE, Health Editor of The Times stated that in principle the Connecting for Health programme is a positive step forward in providing safer patient care in the NHS. However, Mr Hawkes stressed that the Connecting for Health programme is currently largely incomplete and thus at present largely untested. He expressed concerns about system failures on the programme that have already happened in isolated areas and added that such failures could be disastrous if they occurred on a national scale.

Mr Hawkes called for a greater provision of public information from the Government around the programme, so that patients fully understand how Connecting for Health will operate across the NHS. With regards to the programme's rollout over the next decade, Mr Hawkes stated that a timely delivery of the service was crucial in ensuring the long-term provision of patient safety nationwide.

Andy Burnham MP, the Minister responsible for NHS Delivery and Quality, followed on from Nigel Hawkes by accepting that Connecting for Health is an extremely ambitious project, but continued by asking the question "why would we not embark on such an ambitious project, when we know the potential of the technology?"

Mr Burnham MP outlined the benefits Connecting for Health will bring to patient safety by reducing illegible handwritten prescriptions and discharge notes and by providing enhanced digital imaging that will improve the accuracy of patient diagnosis.

Mr Burnham MP was keen to stress that in all stages of Connecting for Health's development and implementation, patient safety must be at "the heart of the process".

Dr Hamish Meldrum, Chairman of the General Practitioners Committee at British Medical Association, stressed that the introduction of IT systems to the NHS must be an evolutionary process and not thrust upon staff.

From a GP's perspective, Dr Meldrum stated that Connecting for Health would in theory provide fast and reliable access to patients' medical records, which in turn will help inform clinical decisions. However, Dr Meldrum noted that medical staff wanted more information and assurances on how robust the new programme will be. He argued that the input and uploading of data must be done in a strict, standardised manner, otherwise the accuracy of Connecting for Health will be compromised and called for greater cooperation between primary and secondary care sectors in this process

Dr Meldrum argued that those responsible for the programme needed to make a greater effort to work with GPs and gain their "trust" in the effectiveness of Connecting for Health. Dr Meldrum said that in the past IT training for GPs has generally been poor and that both healthcare professionals and the general public needed to be properly briefed on the new programme to ensure its successful implementation.

This discussion was followed by a Q&A session between the panel and attendees