Chapter 7
Digital Governance and the NHS

ABSTRACT

The benefits of a fully-digitalised public healthcare system are significant. Digital health is an essential tool in order to improve efficiency, provide coordinated care, and make real health improvements. However, the National Health Service (NHS) has yet to provide a fully digitalised system to patients and providers despite technological advances in recent years. This chapter will thus describe the progress which has already been made in providing remote health services within the NHS. It will also explore problems arising from digitalising health services and the management of health both within the institution and through more informal networks beyond the NHS.

INTRODUCTION

There is a clear recognition from health leaders within the UK that a fully-digitalised NHS is vital for the future of this institution. There are a great number of benefits to integrating digital technology within public health systems. It can provide solutions to many of the challenges raised in this publication: enabling patients to better engage with the health system and healthcare providers, improving efficiency and the co-ordination of care, making real health improvements through technological innovations, providing vital information for patients and providers, etc. While the NHS has used technology in the provision of healthcare for many years, with the first scans

and computer technology for administration introduced in the 1970s, the ambition of the Department of Health is that the NHS will be fully-digitalised by 2024. This chapter will explore what the digital governance framework means for the NHS, what advances have already been made and the challenges to achieving a fully digitalised NHS. It will also look more generally at problems arising from digitalising health services and the management of health through more informal networks beyond the NHS.

TOWARDS A NEW DIGITAL GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK FOR THE NHS

Fully-digitalising health is expected to bring benefits such as improved quality, efficiency and health of the population (Imison, Castle-Clarke, Watson & Edwards, 2016). McKinsey estimates that modernisation, notably through digitalisation, could help save between 7% and 11.5% of funds currently allocated to public healthcare. It can lead to a more active role in managing one's health thanks to information and support provided online (Gretton & Honeyman, 2016). It helps monitor safety and care. It can contribute to making efficiency gains because information is more easily accessible. New medical techniques can help advance medical practice (analytics techniques, machine learning) (Gretton & Honeyman, 2016). It can also contribute towards integrated care.

While digitalisation in the healthcare sector, which implies leveraging digitisation to improve processes, is often seen as a slower process than in other service sectors, such as finance, there has been a digitalisation process in motion to improve the delivery of health services in the UK for many years now. However, it was not until 1992 that a clear digitalisation strategy (or IT strategy) was devised by the NHS Management Executive. Yet the most wide-reaching policy to digitalise across the UK was the National Programme for IT (NPfIT) in 2002. Significant investment, a total of £10 billion, went into this comprehensive health IT programme. The aim was to implement integrated Electronic Patient Records (EPR) systems across the NHS – which could be accessed by 30,000 general practitioners and authorised healthcare professionals in 300 hospitals (Justinia, 2017). However, the NPfIT met with a great number of difficulties and was dismantled in September 2011. The explanation for the failure of the scheme was that it was overly centralised and

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