Developing the Health Informatics workforce: challenge, progress and future

A two hour session led by ASSIST took place at HC2008 as part of the conference strand on Developing the Health Informatics workforce. Brian Derry, Chair of ASSIST, opened the session with some personal conjectures about some possible workforce implications from the national informatics review.

The ‘information’ issues uncovered by the review include access to good quality information; the current gaps where there are little or no data sources and the need for appropriate standards which fit how care is delivered now and in the future.

The review also looked at the National Programme for IT and re-iterated the need for NHS health informatics workforce issues to be addressed including:
- Professional standards
- Capacity, agility and visibility
- Customer focus and communications
- Keeping up to date with NHS and health informatics best practice.

Looking at how the NHS is organised to deliver informatics systems, service and processes, the review’s main message affirmed the core purpose of health informatics as key to NHS transformation and care delivery processes. This challenges the workforce to prove they can deliver. Brian suggested the review is a unique opportunity finally to achieve a health informatics workforce strategy which is fully implemented and helps create a cadre of world class informaticians.

John Willshere followed explaining some of the current capability and capacity initiatives that NHS Connecting for Health has initiated for health informatics teams and individuals.

Pam Hughes explained a pilot trainee scheme across 3 Strategic Health Authorities to grow new health informatics staff following a proven model used already in the NHS in Finance, Human Resources and General Management.

Ken Bloomfield explained how UKCHIP is looking to support the health informatics individual with a certification scheme. This is a development from the current voluntary registration scheme in place.

These speakers highlighted some excellent initiatives which would be even more powerful with an explicit strategy and focus for the workforce. With this in mind Brian challenged those in attendance to create an open letter to the incoming Chief Information Officer (CIO). What follows is the amalgamation of the contributions from an enthusiastic audience.
Dear CIO,

Welcome! We are delighted that you have joined us in trying to lead ICT-enabled change in health and social care. As practitioners, educators and suppliers committed to this cause, we offer our thoughts on your new role.

The post of NHS CIO brings many opportunities, including:

- Raising the importance and status of health informatics across the NHS
- Providing a role model for the future workforce
- A fresh start, learning the lessons of past but not dwelling on them
- Mainstreaming informatics across the NHS
- Promoting the value of health informatics (people, tools, systems and processes) to clinical colleagues – walking the walk as well as talking the talk
- Ring-fencing resources
- Setting out and implementing a practical HI workforce strategy, with clear vision, values and direction
- Re-stressing positive relations with the informatics private sector and develop a public/private partnership with common workforce standards
- Developing cross-sector informatics, in public and private sector health and social care services
- Creating a more accurate picture of health priorities and directly supporting NHS delivery through the better use of information

To make the best of these opportunities we would like you to:

- Be a respected and credible role model, with clear values
- Provide visible, positive leadership and help overcome the schadenfreude which corrodes informatics
- Be a skilled communicator and influencer, and speak up for the informatics profession
- Use your position at the DH top table to lead ICT-enabled change and promote the informatics profession – you will be ‘in at the beginning’ of the implementation of the informatics review, with a fresh pair of eyes and without any baggage
- Be the policy gateway and bridge between DH policy ‘wonks’ and the NHS informatics workforce
- Be a charismatic diplomat!

The corridors of power can be very seductive and create a centrist, DH-policy dominated view of the world. Your ultimate success will depend on “front line” practitioners; and theirs will depend on you. Mutual reliance built on mutual respect can achieve much but you will need to stay in close touch with the ‘front-line’. There will be those with unrealistic expectations of you. You will win people over by listening, making your own mind up and communicating. The world of the NHS is such that your remit may change considerably and without warning, so pragmatism ad flexibility will be essential; but please do not lose your core vision or values.
Keep an eye on the UK-wide perspective and be open to evidence of good practice from anywhere – include Europe and the rest of the world where appropriate. However, please don’t ‘throw the English baby out with the bath water’, allow planning blight or stifle innovation.

There are important tasks to complete and we urge you to:

• Recommend that each NHS organisation has a director for informatics on the Board – someone who has informatics expertise and is professionally qualified. These people will be your principle means of delivery and they will need influence and authority locally to succeed. The NHS Chief Executive has recognised the importance of having an informatics professional on his Board and other chief executives should be encouraged to do likewise.
• Recognise the quality of the existing Health Informatics workforce. They have achieved much in very difficult circumstances and have still more to offer.
• Commission and lead development of a health informatics workforce strategy and funded implementation plan which delivers the needs of the English NHS and is integrated with the plans of the other home countries
• Do not get distracted from delivering this health informatics workforce strategy – create a world class health informatics profession to support a world class NHS!
• Recognise the elements of health informatics that are components of ‘everyone’s job’ – build an information culture across the service
• Get the right balance – between the centre, suppliers and local informatics services. Competition is healthy.
• Investment – make appropriate investment in the right places, at the right pace and for the right length of time. Stop-go funding produces stop-go delivery.
• Innovate and be prepared to take calculated risks. Not everything in HI works first time and a culture of learning-by-doing would be a good thing. Obsessive fear of failure is stifling.
• Take advice and deliver early practical solutions that can be implemented

And we would further suggest that you do not:

• Commission another informatics review but focus on delivering the one we have.
• Listen to all the siren calls from vested interests yet maintain your independence and balance.
• Assume all in HI now is bad; there are many outstanding national and local successes that have made a real difference to patient and client services. Rather build on what is good and what works.
• Succumb to the displacement activity of re-structuring repeatedly.
• Forget the potential contribution of professional associations such as BCS, UKCHIP and ASSIST. These voluntary bodies are united in a common belief in the importance of informatics to the NHS and of a skilled, professional workforce.
• Quit too early instead help us see all this through.
• Look too much inwards to the Department of Health and not enough outwards to the NHS.

To help you get started, we offer three things for you to focus on in your first month:
• Commission and lead development of a HI workforce strategy and funded implementation plan which delivers the needs of English NHS and is integrated with the plans of the home countries
• Validate and articulate how HI supports the core business of the NHS, and set out your personal values
• Engage with the people who can build a world class health informatics workforce and help you succeed in your new role.

Yours faithfully,

Your friends and allies at HC 2008

The session closed quite positively, and delegates left the session wondering who might be out there to apply for this marvellous position!

Pam Hughes
ASSIST NC
Secretary