The main international focus for health care informatics is the International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA). The Association is made up of representatives from around the world drawn from whichever group exists for health care computing within each country. In the UK the British Computer Society (BCS) is the main focus for informatics activities and within it is the Health Informatics Specialist Group (HISG). The Nursing Specialist Group is one of the five members of the HISG.

IMIA seeks to promote informatics across the world, achieving this in part through a triennial international congress popularly known as MEDINFO, and also by the work undertaken by Special Interest Groups and Working Groups. The latter tend to be set up to achieve specific objectives and are time-limited. The Special Interest Groups have specific objectives and are on-going. The type of group will depend on the topic and the objects the members wish to achieve. Any IMIA member country that has an idea, with people who share the interest, can set up a group, but its bylaws or terms of reference must be approved by the Chairman of IMIA if it is to come under the IMIA umbrella.

The Special Interest Group on Nursing Informatics (SIGNI) was established in September 1982 following the successful first International open forum on "The Impact of Computers on Nursing", held in London under the chairmanship of Maureen Scholes, one of the founder members of the BCS Nursing Specialist Group. SIGNI acts as the international focus for activities in nursing informatics, to provide international links for those who work, or are interested in the field, and to foster collaboration among nurses.

The specific objectives are to:

- explore the scope of nursing informatics and its implications for information handling activities associated with nursing care delivery, nursing administration, nursing research and nursing education, and the various relationships with other health care information systems;
- support the development of nursing informatics in the IMIA member countries;
- provide appropriate informatics meetings, conferences and post-conference meetings as opportunities to share knowledge and research, and to facilitate communication of developments in the field;
- encourage the publication and dissemination of research and development materials in the field of nursing informatics;
- develop recommendations, guidelines and courses related to nursing informatics.

SIGNI holds a triennial conference as a key means of meeting these objectives. The conferences have been held in Canada (1985), Ireland (1988), Australia (1991), Texas (1994) and one will be in Denmark in 1997. The conference proceedings provide a wealth of research articles, review papers and actual experiences and lessons learned from introducing nursing information systems.

INFOrmed Touch No. 2

Working conferences, on specific issues usually follow the main conference and the proceedings are published. Experts in the chosen topic are invited to present their work and experience, workshops then debate the issues and take the work forward. So far these topics have included: preparing nurses for using nursing information systems (educational competencies); decision support systems in nursing; health care information technology and the implications for change; and quality assurance.

Nursing symposia, seminars and workshops are also held during MEDINFO. SIGNI also maintains contact with the International Council for Nurses and with the World Health Organisation. At present SIGNI has 26 members who meet at MEDINFO or at the International Nursing Conference. The United Kingdom representative is elected by the BCS Nursing Specialist Group, links are maintained through the Nursing Professions Information Group and with the Chief Nurses from the government departments in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Other ways that SIGNI uses to achieve its objectives are through smaller working groups of SIGNI members. At present there are three working groups: the Newsletter committee produces an annual newsletter which includes reports of the latest conference; a summary of each country's nursing informatics activities; information about major products from around the world and reports from other SIGNI working groups. The second group on Standards has been formulated but its objectives have not yet been agreed.

The third group on Education has put forward the following ideas for its terms of reference:

- develop course accreditation guidelines; establish the process for course accreditation;
- identify and describe types of nursing informatics courses;
- review existing core nursing informatics competency requirements for the average nursing user, educator, administrator, researcher and informatician;
- examine options for the delivery of education programmes;
- examine issues and options associated with cross-institutional and cross-country programme delivery.

The wealth of interest, enthusiasm and commitment of individual members of SIGNI make it a valuable resource for anyone interested in nursing informatics and how it can enhance patient care. Anyone who wishes to contribute to the aims of the group can participate in the conferences and working groups in their many forms. Observers at the SIGNI meetings are always welcome.