

The age of assurance

As advances in technology and interactivity grow, Healthcare Programme Manager at Intellect Jon Lindberg considers how a liberated NHS can be adequately secured...

Digital solutions have quickly transformed every aspect of our daily routines. We are increasingly accustomed to on-demand access to information and immediate communication through a variety of channels, wherever we are and whenever we want. This digital revolution serves as the backdrop from which the reforms to the NHS have been thought through. The new NHS is intended to be more focused around patients and their needs. Patients can benefit greatly from this but it also introduces challenges for maintaining a secure and trusted NHS.

In practice, the NHS reforms will be achieved through an 'Information Revolution' that gives people more information, control and choice about their care; requiring accurate information to flow seamlessly through the NHS to the patient and back. Information systems, web-based applications and mobile devices will be the tools that allow patient related information to reach the people that need it when they need it. This is also where some of the challenges lie. The most sensitive information is often found in patient records and the NHS must be able to protect this information from ending up in the wrong hands.

Data breaches in the headlines

In June last year, the Information Commissioner's Office warned it 'remains highly concerned that data breaches involving people's personal information are continuing to occur in NHS organisations'. If the public is expected to be more actively involved in the information chain, information assurance and technology security will become more important. According to Deputy Information Commissioner David Smith: "Extra vigilance is required so that people's personal information does not end up in the wrong hands...staff must be adequately trained not just in the value of personal information, but in how to protect it."

The challenges from within and beyond the NHS

If we are moving towards a multi-system approach with millions of data transfers reaching more people, new risks to information assurance are exposed. Internally, the NHS will have to deal with well meaning NHS employees, who are the most common 'culprits' and also pose the greatest risks to the NHS. These are the stories we read on the

front pages – stolen laptops, misplaced USB sticks and forgotten printouts – and they are usually innocent accidents by staff that are simply trying to do their jobs in an efficient manner. Some of the best measures to protect against these accidents are to enforce pragmatic information assurance processes and procedures. For example: educate staff; don't email patient data to an unsecured PC; encrypt hard disk data; don't allow USB sticks; and monitor and act on breaches to the policy so that each organisation learns for the future.

Externally the NHS faces the threat of 'malicious outsiders' who explicitly target the NHS for financial gains. This threat will more or less always be there and there are ways the NHS can protect itself better. According to Tony Osborn, of Symantec, the NHS can reduce the impact from this threat by "ensuring the users of the systems are well educated and aware of how the attacks come.

"Obviously technology plays a key role here and certain key principles exist such as layers of defence (at endpoint, server and gateway layers). But as the health delivery model evolves we may find the responsibility for information assurance moves and we need to ensure that new systems have information assurance processes designed into ICT delivery from the outset."

The NHS already has security standards and processes in place, but new thinking may be needed in the liberated NHS. That is why a meeting has been set up with the Information Commissioner's Office and the Department of Health to work on creating a coherent confidentiality management approach for patients and citizens as the NHS gears up to be more open and interactive through technology.

Intellect is the trade association for the UK's technology sector representing 780 member companies ranging from major multinationals to SMEs. Intellect's Healthcare programme works with more than 250 companies that are at the forefront of developing and deploying solutions across the health sector.



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