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Editorial: Electronic records' management

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E-records are easy to create but difficult to manage.

Except for the electronic health record, electronic records' management in the NHS context does not get the publicity of other IT initiatives; however, it is fundamental to the success of the enterprise and underpins all activities.

Records are information created, received and held by an organisation or an individual as evidence and information of activity. As well as patient records, the NHS needs to manage the records of its business functions, processes, activities and transactions, such as minutes of meetings, employee details, financial details and so on. Records can be either paper or electronic. More and more records are not only electronic but are born, live and die digital. As well as electronic documents, a wide range of other non-paper record formats are routinely found in the NHS context, including images such as X-rays, photographs, microforms, audio-visual media, emails and text messages.

The crucial characteristic of a record, that distinguishes it from other information, is its contextuali-

sation; the metadata that describe its context, content and structure and how it has been used and managed over time, e.g. title, subject, description, creator, date, format. To ensure that records perform their function, their authenticity (they are what they are intended to be) and integrity (they are complete and unaltered) must be ensured.

The principles of managing e-records are very similar to the traditional principles of managing paper records. However, e-records have characteristics that make the *practice* of their management more problematic.

With office software and email, staff are used to creating documents and messages easily, and often with

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little recognition that these are probably corporate records and need appropriate management. In fact, the flexible and open nature of IT, and particularly the internet, create the feeling among the staff that these records are their own personal property. This feeling is compounded by the fact that many organisations do not provide staff with the necessary infrastructure or skills for e-record management.

Guidance on e-records management: UK Department of Health's code of practice, NHS' Records Management Roadmap and National Archives' initiatives and guidelines

The authenticity and integrity of e-records are much harder to ensure as they are very easy to copy, change, or delete. Often e-records, such as those within databases, are fluid and dynamic. E-records can be very insecure as they are easily sent to other people via email or portable CDs, data sticks and laptops, and can, therefore, fall into the wrong hands. The long-term preservation of e-records is also difficult. Software quickly becomes out of date and a file created in a superseded version of an application may

be unreadable in more recent versions. Changes in hardware can also make applications or data storage media unusable, e.g. PCs no longer have floppy disc readers. Data storage media do not have a long life-span; for example, poor quality CDs, stored in the wrong conditions, may only last a few years.

Existing standard office software is not particularly useful for managing e-records; you need a software

product specifically designed for the purpose. One example of an NHS organisation that has implemented an e-records management system (ERMS) is the Purchasing and Supply Agency (PASA) <www.pasa.nhs.uk/PASAWeb/NHSPurchasement/AboutNHSPASA/Electronicrecordsmanagement/LandingPage.htm>. The practical

implementation of this ERMS has been written up as a case study.¹

A range of guidance on e-records management is available: the UK Department of Health's code of practice;² the NHS Records Management Roadmap <www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/systemsandservices/infogov/records>; and The National Archives' initiatives and guidelines <www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/default.htm>.

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1. Gregory K. Implementing an electronic records management system: a public sector case study. *Records Manage J* 2005; 15(2): 80–85.
2. Department of Health. *Records Management: NHS Code of Practice. Parts 1 and 2*. London: DH, 2006; 1–203. <www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4131747>.

OPERA (Online Personal Education and Risk Assessment)

Press release:

<www.macmillan.org.uk/About_Us/Newsroom/Latest_News/Launch_online_personalised_assessment_fo.aspx>

Tool:

<www.cancerbackup.org.uk/Aboutcancer/Genetics/GeneticBreastOvarianCancerRiskAssessmentTool>

Launched by Macmillan Cancer Support, OPERA is 'the first online interactive software program which gives personalised information of a person's risk of inherited breast and ovarian cancer and where to get further advice'. The tool is based on the NICE guidance for familial breast cancer.

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