
Volume 4 / Issue 1 / 2009 - Features

Britain Moves to Lift Mobile Phone Ban in Hospital

Catalina Ciolan,

While much of Europe slumbered through its summer vacation, the programme to build a pan-European e-Health network shifted up one notch, after the European Commission published a Recommendation on cross-border interoperability of electronic health record (EHR) systems.

Hospitals in England should allow the “widest possible use” of mobile phones by patients as well as staff and visitors, except in areas where they interfere with medical equipment or invade privacy. The advice, in a January 2009 Guidance Note from the Department of Health, is likely to have considerable repercussions on vendors of dedicated in-hospital telephony systems.

A decade-long controversy

The Guidance Note follows recurrent controversy over the past decade over the issue.

In 1999, the British government commissioned a group of scientists known as the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP), to explore the purported health hazards from mobile phone use and living close to base stations. The group reported back in May 2000, but did not settle the debate conclusively. Though it ruled out a “general risk” to people living near base stations, it did note that radio waves at current guideline levels did “cause a change in brain activity, although it is not known why.”

The IEGMP recommended a limited use of mobile phones until there was more scientific knowledge about the subject.

‘2007: Too Early to Say’

The IEGMP was followed by a Mobile Telecommunications and Health Research Programme (MTHR) which released a progress report in 2007. This concluded that there was “no evidence linking short-term mobile phone use with cancers of the brain and nervous system.” Yet it too concluded that it was “too early to say whether mobiles are safe in the long term,” and called for further research in the area.

Nonetheless, in May 2007, the Health Department recommended that mobile phones be banned in sensitive areas such as pediatric wards, ICU units and operating theatres.

Though Caveats Remain ...

The latest (January 2009) guidelines go a considerable distance in freeing up mobile phone usage in hospitals. However, they still add a caveat – requiring the hospital administration to make a “local risk assessment” that such use would not represent a threat to:

- Ó Patients’ own safety or that of others
- Ó Operation of electrically sensitive medical devices in critical care situations
- Ó Privacy and dignity.

The third point above specifically concerns the use of camera phones, which can breach patient confidentiality.

Overall, hospitals must therefore clearly indicate where mobile phones can and cannot be used, the guidelines state.

... Patient Groups Welcome Decision

The new guidelines have been welcomed by patient advocacy group. The vice-chairman of the Patients’ Association Michael Summers told the

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British media that in the average ward there was "absolutely no reason" why a mobile phone could not be used - provided it was done discreetly and without upsetting those nearby.

Published on : Sun, 4 Jan 2009