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Healthcare IT Needs A 'People Side' Too

Searching through the programme for the World of Health IT (WHIT) conference and exhibition, which takes place in Vienna from 22-25 October, what stands out is the evident commitment on behalf of the organisers to engage with as many stakeholders as possible.

The 2006 event in Geneva drew around 2,000 attendees and was certainly a success by any standards, except the relative lack of 'front-line soldiers' to be found.

This will not be the case in Vienna. The whole 2007 event focuses on the impact of technology on healthcare delivery, the successful implementation of which lies in large part with the teams on the ground.

The nurses' symposium is of particular moment. Because, if the people at the business end of patient care are unable or unwilling to embrace the new technologies, then the road forward will come to a sudden end somewhere up a dark alley.

Although there is undoubtedly some measure of resistance from among the old guard in the nursing profession, most practitioners now accept that technology is the way forward, whether that technology be in the form of electronic patient records or, say, online prescriptions.

Nurses and Healthcare IT

The moderator at the nurses' symposium will be Nicholas Hardiker, a Senior Research Fellow at the Salford Centre for Nursing, Midwifery and Collaborative Research at the University of Salford, in the UK.

Hardiker has a background in nursing, has published widely. He finds the symposium a particularly welcome event, as the key issues within healthcare IT, as he sees them, are quality, efficiency and the passing on of knowledge.

He says: "Globally, there are issues over patient safety and the cost of medical errors through the prescribing of medicines. This has been measured, comprehensively in the US, and can certainly be improved. IT can speed up the access to medical details, for example.

But it's not all plain sailing, concedes Hardiker. "Yes, there are problems. Many nurses have not grown up with IT and there can be a degree of resistance. But let's be honest, I hear some nurses say 'I don't like or understand computers,' yet they walk out of the door and start texting on their mobile phones.

"There needs to be proper training, of course. But it's not as though the nurses can't get to grips with new technology. I'm more inclined to believe that if a system doesn't work as efficiently as it could, it's down to the software, not the users being incapable.

Nurses adapted and got on with the job – crucially, in an enhanced and more efficient way. But it's fair to say that there's more trepidation in the profession than there is in the population at large, while things are still embryonic."

Management is the Key

Hardiker argues that the bulk of training is required to teach users proper IT management, rather than training nurses to use simple programmes, which is relatively easy.

"There's a 'people side' to healthcare IT," he insists. "We need leadership at all levels within the profession. Within the whole health industry, budget-holders included. It's not just a top-down issue. The key question, talking specifically in the case of nurses here, is how can nurse leaders influence the process of IT introduction and usage? That's what needs to be addressed, and will be at the symposium."

Speakers at the event, such as Professor Doctor Ursula Hübner, from the University of Applied Sciences in Osnabrück, Germany, will be taking up arms on behalf of healthcare IT.

Doctor Hübner highlights medical expiry dates as a practical example of its effective use: "Databases have largely made errors in this area a thing of the past – quite simply, clinicians now have far more immediately accessible knowledge on the tools with which they are working.

"And that can only be for the good." The other two symposia are aimed at physicians and, not by accident, leaders and leadership. Towards the end of the sessions, which run concurrently, there will be a chance for each group to discuss the challenges and solutions with the others.

That represents leaders and persuaders on all levels and from all areas of the medical profession. As Hardiker puts it: "The 'people side."

For further details on the three-day programme at the 2007 World of Health IT Conference and Exhibition, go to

www.worldofhealthit.org.

Published on : Thu, 28 Jul 2005