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Nursing and eHealth: Are We Preparing Our Future Nurses as Automatons or Informaticians?

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Abstract. The Education Working Group of IMIA NI present this thought provoking panel where the changing and challenging role of nursing will be explored within the information intensive eHealth arena. The session will be of interest to any nurse as the discussion will be driven by the objective of trying to understand how best to prepare nurses to be actively engaged in information and communication technology (ICT) developments that enhance care assessment, delivery, evaluation and audit. As a balance, the discussion will consider the increasing emergence of 'nursing by numbers' where risk assessment tools are used in an automatic way leaving little room for individual evidenced based care.

Keywords. Education, competencies, risk assessment, care, ICT

1. Description

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines eHealth as "... the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for health. Examples include treating patients, conducting research, educating the health workforce, tracking diseases and monitoring public health." [1] Nursing is more difficult to define: according to the International Council for Nursing [2] "Nursing encompasses autonomous and collaborative care of individuals of all ages, families, groups and communities, sick or well and in all settings. Nursing includes the promotion of health, prevention of illness, and the care of ill, disabled and dying people. Advocacy, promotion of a safe environment, research, participation in shaping health policy and in patient and health systems management, and education are also key nursing roles." Certainly this definition gives an indication of the diverse range of nursing roles, and it is this diversity that causes some difficulties in determining collectivity amongst nurses and in maintaining a strong nursing voice in eHealth initiatives.

Part of the reason for the lack of volume of the nursing voice in eHealth must be the massive and regular changes in nursing and healthcare provision over the past ten to twenty years. Job titles have changed, job roles have changed, the way healthcare is delivered has and continues to change, professional dilution has occurred and nursing has perhaps been the greatest net loss group.

Concentration over recent years has been on reducing the costs of care whilst at the same time the drivers for nursing care have compounded. These drivers include the increased intensity of care delivery, increased care outside of hospitals and increasing reliance upon risk assessment, all of which has placed massive pressure upon the point of contact for care.

The barriers preventing nursing engaging further in eHealth include the employer's financial attitude where investment in nursing is seen as a cost rather than a saving; system applications being tactical rather than strategic; limited expert impact to a few members of staff showing an interest rather than creating a pervasive approach; organisations still seeing the technology as computers rather than considering multiple technologies; and management tending towards delegation rather than taking a leadership role. To overcome these barriers it is widely acknowledged that nurses need to be involved in the design, development, implementation and evaluation [3] of clinical computer systems. Sadly according to Dowding [4] there is little evidence to suggest that healthcare organisations are incorporating the knowledge and skills required for effective eHealth development amongst nurses. This view is supported by Mandirola Brioux et al [5] when writing about eHealth in developing countries.

The question is how has nursing education risen to these challenges? The panel will provide perspectives informed by nursing informatics developments within their respective countries before engaging the audience in discussion on how to best prepare nurses for the future and whether that will be as automaton or informatician.

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