

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Managing the Knowledge Base of Health Care A Report on a Seminar held by the British Library (British Library R&D Report No 6133)**

*Reviewed by Stephen Timmons*

This is a 67 page report on a seminar held last September at the King's Fund (the independent health services "think-tank"). It brought together people from medical libraries, the National Health Service, the Department of Health and the British Library.

The starting point for the seminar was the rapid expansion of knowledge base in healthcare. Evidence was produced to show the proliferation of books and journals in the field, and that they continue to expand. Allied to this is the vital importance of getting this knowledge to the right people. If high quality healthcare is to be delivered, all of those involved need to be appraised of the latest and most relevant knowledge within their own (and other) disciplines.

The problem is that this task is much more than any one person can cope with. That this is not a new problem was demonstrated by a quote from a 1964 issue of *The Lancet*, "The times have passed since a single human mind could even pretend to know all that might be useful in treating patients". Consideration of how this problem is to be managed revolves around two issues: what information is important and how to get it to the right people.

The first presentation written up in this report is about assessing what information is important; in other words, examining the effectiveness of particular treatments. Obviously, there is little point in disseminating information on treatment that is not effective, or is positively harmful. In a very interesting article, Dr Iain Chambers, Director of the UK Cochrane Centre, explains the work of Archie Cochrane, one of the most influential thinkers on the measurement of the effectiveness of healthcare. Cochrane is quoted as saying, "It is surely a great criticism of our profession that we have not organised a critical summary, by specialty or subspecialty, adapted periodically, of all relevant randomised controlled trials".

The work of the Cochrane Centres, in the UK and other countries, is dedicated to redressing this deficiency. This work will eventually result in a database of randomised controlled trials. This knowledge will be made available world wide so that the crucial information, on what treatment is most effective, can get to the relevant professionals.

The conference then moved on to consider the second issue, that of how this information should be transmitted. This discussion can be further subdivided into consideration of the principles for dissemination, and of how new technology can help in this process. The principles for dissemination, while easy to elucidate, are rather harder to implement. They include a clear understanding of the objectives of the organisation at all levels, from NHS to individual wards or clinics, an ability and willingness to share information across professions and organisations, and to ensure that the information needs lead the technology, and not vice versa. This leads naturally on to the presentations about the use of technology and what it can offer.

Ian Nicholls from the NISME Information Management Groups spoke about the NHS IT network. He explained what the national network would do and outlined other projects in

the NHS Information Strategy. What would have been really interesting were some ideas about how the NHS network could actually be used for the sort of information transmission discussed earlier. It is also interesting to note that the date for the installation of the network mentioned by Ian Nicholls has already slipped. Jeremy Wyatt from the Imperial Cancer Research Fund provided some good workshop materials on the advantages and disadvantages of various methods of data transmission.

One debate of considerable relevance to those of us who work on the interface of Higher education and the NHS was around the security risks in linking NHS databases onto academic networks, notably the Internet. My personal view is that many of the fears about data security, especially links with Internet, are unfounded and should not stand in the way of linkage of information across institutions. The threat to security caused by a perceived group of "hackers" is substantially less serious than that posed by sloppy practice in existing paper based systems. In my experience, this threat is usually cited by those who know least about it.

The overall conclusion of the seminar was that there are no easy answers. When are there any? The essential conclusions were about policy and principles, and it was good to see this level of enthusiasm and commitment to the use of IT in solving these problems.

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