The digital agenda

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What's the problem?

While almost every aspect of our daily lives is being transformed by the use of digital and data driven technology, progress in healthcare remains stubbornly slow. Opportunities to improve population health, patient care and doctors' working lives are being missed as a result. And while there have been some laudable attempts to capture the benefits the innovation in information technology in healthcare inevitably bring, they remain small scale and generally have only a patchy implementation.

We have recently seen a promising new focus on bringing the benefits to patients and clinicians on a much wider scale, thanks to the work of NHS Digital and the Secretary of State for Health, a self-confessed technophile. That said, while the will is there at the centre, driving the cultural change that is needed at a local level remains problematic.

Doctors, who should be part of this overdue change, have traditionally been cynical about participating in this revolution – in many cases justifiably so – should recognise that the landscape is changing rapidly. Failure to keep pace with progress will see others, perhaps from the commercial sector, capitalising on new ways of working but at a deeper cost to the health and care systems and patients across the UK.

What can the Government do?

Digital transformation and the use of big data is potentially life-saving. It should be viewed as a long-term investment that requires continuous resourcing to remain effective. There has been a significant national investment of £4.2bn to bring the NHS into the digital age. National strategy has focused on encouraging and fostering digital transformation at a local level. Previous failed national efforts at digital transformation have demonstrated that local engagement is key. However, for a digitally enabled health and care system to work effectively and uniformly, national standards should be developed to make sure that they are interoperable. Clinicians should be part of that process. At the same time, local innovation and development must be encouraged, but this should also be balanced with an overview of developments nationally.

It is vital too that patients are at the centre of any health system transformation and this is especially true with digital transformation. Patients must trust the system they are part of. Data-sharing in health and social care has always been topical and somewhat controversial. It is important that patients are made aware of the benefits that sharing their information could have, not just on their own health, but that of family members too and others with the same or similar conditions.

It is also important that any processes with regards to data-sharing are transparent with a strong governance processes in place as recommended in the Caldicott Review. Patient data belongs to patients and it is important that any decisions made in the digital sphere reflect this principle.

What can Colleges and the medical profession do?

Digital transformation will only work if the healthcare workforce supports it. Improving patient care is the duty of all healthcare professionals and if done correctly, digital transformation will improve patient care. Transformation and innovation will be most effective when clinicians are engaged in its development, procurement and use. The Academy is determined to be at the centre of the conversation about digital innovation and to be part of the solution.

For this reason, the Academy, its members and a range of key players from health, science and academia are working together to produce 'Artificial Intelligence in healthcare – a guide for doctors and patients' which examines the impact of AI on 12 separate domains of healthcare from an ethical, clinical and practical perspective. The guide will be published in January 2019 and further work in this sphere will follow.