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TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL STATUS FOR HEALTH INFORMATICIANS IN THE UK

Further information on UKCHIP is available at: <http://www.ukchip.org>
Materials from the July 2002 conference are available at: http://www.nhsia.nhs.uk/def/pages/features/f_101002.asp

Is health informatics a profession? If it is, then who are health informaticians, how should they be regulated, how will they maintain continuing professional competence, and how are the public to be protected when they make mistakes? These are some of the questions that have been exercising the minds of many involved in health informatics in the UK, both those working within the National Health Service (NHS), and those who are members of existing health informatics organisations. The establishment of the UK Council for Health Informatics Professions (UKCHIP) is the first step to answering many of these questions, and to the establishment of a framework within which the expertise of health informatics professionals can be recognised, rewarded, and, where necessary, sanctioned.

In the UK, as in many other countries, several organisations exist, some of which have been active for many years, within the domain that we call health informatics. Some of these organisations have attempted to represent, or provide forms of service for, different sectors within the wide range of people who have an interest in health informatics, and its various subsets and branches, including nursing informatics and medical informatics. In a similar manner to COACH, the British Computer Society Health Informatics Committee (BCS HIC) has for many years been recognised at the international level as the representative body for health informatics in the UK. It appoints representatives to IMIA (International Medical Informatics Association), EFMI (European Federation of Medical Informatics), and other bodies.

Establishing the need

As health informatics becomes a more important part of health care, it is having greater impact on patient care. There have been examples within the UK and elsewhere where poor health informatics has caused damage to patients (e.g. the London Ambulance computer system problems, and breaches of patient confidentiality resulting from software upgrades). It is also recognised that good informatics can improve patient care. Following a growing consensus that there is a need to develop health informatics as an independent profession, and due to various drivers, including Government policy on the development of health informatics within the NHS, UKCHIP has been established to provide a means of ensuring that all of those concerned with health informatics have appropriate qualifications and experience.

What is UKCHIP

UKCHIP aims to be a professional registration body for all those involved in health informatics. It is envisaged that its primary function will be to hold a Register of those who have been accredited as health informaticians. It will also be necessary to have processes for the deregistration of those who fail to maintain adequate professional standards, in the same way that medical practitioners and nurses can be removed from their professional registers. UKCHIP will assess qualifications, core competencies and codes of conduct produced by other bodies, including academic, employer (the NHS in particular) and professional bodies. To facilitate these developments, UKCHIP will establish standards for professional conduct, qualification and development of health informaticians, and has already established working parties to address these issues. Full details of UKCHIP's aims are available on the website.

While concern has been expressed about the effect such a new body might have on existing health informatics organisations, it has been clearly stated by Dr. Glyn Hayes, interim President of UKCHIP, that UKCHIP is not intended to replace any existing bodies. It will be an umbrella organisation for those practicing in the field, in the same way that, within many other professions, a registration body exists

alongside many other bodies with specific interests and activities, and often with co-membership.

Who are health informaticians?

One of the key issues that we in the UK, and health informaticians in other countries, have to address is that of exactly who is a health informatician, and so what might be their requirements in terms of, for example, continuing professional development. UKCHIP has been founded with the support of the British Computer Society (BCS), NHS Information Authority (NHSIA), ASSIST (the Association of ICT professionals in the NHS), the UK Institute for Health Informatics, and is associated with other bodies. Among those it is envisaged will be covered by UKCHIP's remit are:

- all those working in the technical side of healthcare informatics within the NHS and more widely;
- health records and coding staff, includes those who handle health records and code data into healthcare systems, and are responsible for extracting information from healthcare records (e.g. for clinical audit and management information);
- knowledge-based service providers, such as librarians;
- clinical informaticians, who design, develop, educate or manage clinical record systems and the patient data held therein, including managers of these staff; and
- academic staff, concerned with the development and implementation of education, awareness and training about health informatics, and those who research in the field.

It is recognised that health informaticians are often undervalued, inappropriately managed and poorly paid, and the establishment of good professional standards will help to improve this situation. UKCHIP also recognises the important link between those in the NHS delivering care, and those associated with the NHS, such as the higher education providers, and will be open to all relevant individuals.

For all the above, and any other identified categories, it is intended that there will be a set of generic standards, including a Code of Conduct, plus additional specific criteria for each individual constituency. A Registered Health Informatician may be registered within one of the constituencies at one of several levels, including Fellow (registered by virtue of their experience and demonstrable skills) and Registrant (registered by virtue of qualifications obtained and evidence of adequate experience).

Where we go next.

The current timetable for development is that, now the first Shadow Council has been formed, work will proceed on developing a register of individual expressions of interest, to be opened by January 2003, and draft professional standards for consultation will be published by July 2003. Following this consultation, a final version of the standards is expected by September 2003, so allowing the beginnings of a voluntary register of health informatics professionals working in the UK. While initially registration will be voluntary, it is expected that, in the future, the NHS will expect anyone working in health informatics to have obtained registration. Eventually it is envisaged that statutory registration will be needed to protect the needs of patients, although we have a long road to travel to reach that end.



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