Digital Health: How can technology transform the NHS?

Event Report

Concerns about underfunding, increasing waiting times and the severity of this year's 'Winter crisis' have combined with the prospect of a looming general election to ensure that the NHS has never been far from the top of the political agenda. PICTFOR's first event of the year sought to look beyond the party political disagreements and examine the ways in which technology could transform the NHS. An expert panel, chaired by PICTFOR's co-chair and Shadow Cabinet Office Minister Chi Onwurah MP, were asked to share their visions for the future of digital health.

The panel:
- George Freeman MP, Minister for Life Sciences
- Tim Kelsey, National Director for Patients and Information, NHS England
- Dr Ali Parsa, Founder and CEO, Babylon
- Julia Manning, Chief Executive, 2020 Health
- James Balmain, Co-Founder & CEO, Zesty

George Freeman MP, *"the first privileged holder"* of the office of Minister for Life Sciences stressed the importance of the joint nature of his role (BIS and Health) for seeking and unlocking innovation and outlined his commitment to making Britain one of the best places for nurturing innovation for the betterment of patients. Highlighting his firm belief in the need for the NHS to wholeheartedly embrace technological opportunities, the Minister suggested that the very term 'digital health' would soon become an obsolete distinction as all healthcare would be digital. The Minister reasoned that the effective use of data, a prioritization of genomics, and the digitization of health records would simultaneously improve value for money and ensure better health outcomes for patients.

"Data for research. Data for outcomes. Data for patient power. Data is our friend"
George Freeman MP, Minister for Life Sciences

Extolling the role of data in healthcare, Freeman explained how data would unlock best and worst practice to improve outcomes and he assured members that were Nye Bevan (regarded as the father of the NHS) here today he would be *"banging the table for data"*. The crucial role of data in transforming the NHS was echoed by the rest of the panel, particularly by NHS England's Tim Kelsey who made a strong case for the capacity of data to boost transparency across the NHS by ensuring patients, and those who look after them, had access to their data when they needed it.

Moving the focus from data to people, Kelsey reminded members that urgent social justice imperatives demanded digital now, but that digital inclusion was key. From a technical perspective he stressed the need to ensure interoperability across all the innovative devices and programmes that offered so much for the future of healthcare. In conclusion, NHS England's *National Director for Patients and Information* stated that transparency, participation and collaboration were the three core operating principles for delivering digital health.

"We do not have the money. Technology will help make the productivity savings needed"
Tim Kelsey, National Director for Patients and Information, NHS England

Chief Executive of 2020 Health, Julia Manning agreed that data would become the currency of the digital age but refuted the Minister's suggestion that the phrase 'digital health' was set to become redundant just yet – citing the significant behaviour change required before the wholesale digitisation of healthcare could

be achieved. Furthermore, it was argued that for digital health opportunities to be realised, people needed to become more intentional, involved and pro-active about their health. To this end, Manning posited that one of the greatest challenges for digital health technologies was to engage users on an emotional level. Concluding her opening remarks, Manning stressed that social media would be fundamental to the success of the NHS in the future.

"Smart phones are becoming our life support machine"
Julia Manning, Chief Executive, 2020 Health

Dr Ali Parsa, CEO of Babylon Health – a virtual health service app – articulated a positive vision for the future of digital healthcare thanks to recent dramatic improvements in diagnostics, the quality and accessibility of information, widespread ownership of smart devices and the power of progress. Parsa added that technological advancements in computing power and mobile communications had already acted as a healthcare game-changer for people across the world. Parsa concluded that the rise of sensors, the future of nano-technology and the pervasive influence of Moore's law would fundamentally change the way healthcare was accessed, administered and paid for in the future.

"We want to get to a stage where we are constantly diagnosing, just like our cars"
Dr Ali Parsa, Founder and CEO, Babylon

James Balmain, Co-Founder & CEO of Zesty – an online booking service – expressed his belief that the NHS needed to change fundamentally. Balmain's key position was that as demands on the NHS grew, the dividing line between public and private provision of services would blur. It was put that digital health services, such as Zesty, had been proven to introduce new demographics of patients to the NHS. Balmain noted the capacity for digital health to dramatically improve the patient experience across a number of key areas, particularly when the anonymity afforded by digital was of value, for instance in sexual health cases. Speaking from experience, Balmain informed members that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the NHS was remarkably easy to work with and was open to collaboration with the private sector.

"Small, entrepreneurial companies can now focus on a particular problem and then solve it"
James Balmain, Co-Founder & CEO, Zesty

Throughout the debate, there was consensus that the NHS needed to change the way it operated and that technology could help deliver better patient outcomes, whilst spending less. Data access, data usage, interoperability of programmes and devices, and greater engagement from patients were agreed to be fundamental themes for the future of digital health.

What's next?

17th March 2015 – PICTFOR Members Event
General Election 2015: The Rise of Tech
18:00 – 19:30, Macmillan Room, Portcullis House

The political relevance of tech has soared since 2010. Technology underpins every sphere of 21st century life and as more everyday activities migrate online, digital policy offerings are starting to take a more prominent position in voter's minds. As #GE2015 approaches, an expert panel will examine the forces that have fuelled technology's dramatic rise up the political agenda in recent years.

We look forward to welcoming members to the debate. Please contact admin@PICTFOR.org.uk to secure your place.