

# Fog on IT begins to lift

To outsiders, over the past few years, the plans for developing IT systems within the NHS have been shrouded in mystery. It has not been clear what the priorities were, who has been in charge of implementation and what the mandarins have had in store for users (including pharmacists).

Now the fog is beginning to clear, there are signs that people exist who do know how the National Programme for IT will unfold. Part of the reason for the lack of clarity is that the system will be fiendishly complicated, it will involve information about millions of people, require access by possibly hundreds of thousands of NHS staff, and it will need to support a wide range of clinical and administrative activities. There is also a great deal of political kudos at stake — either for those in government when it works wonderfully or for those in opposition when it crashes ignominiously at the feet of its creators. It is hardly surprising that so many people are unsure of how the system will develop.

Leaving that aside, and assuming that the system will eventually deliver on its promises, now is the time for interested pharmacists to put up their hands and offer to help.

We report this week (p223) that the NPfIT is seeking pharmacists (and other clinicians) to help design the aspects of the system that will underpin their professional activities. Although the programme managers are asking for a minimum commitment of two days a week for the next six to 12 months, any pharmacist with a solid understanding of the profession's IT needs should consider applying.

## New opportunities — or a new threat?

As part of the Government's commitment to reducing waiting times for elective surgery and to prevent last-minute cancellations because hospitals have to make way for emergencies, treatment centres have been established in many parts of England. The idea is that they should offer fast-track surgery on a day-case basis for simple cases, leaving established hospitals to handle complicated and emergency work. They also provide diagnostic services.

There are a number of different models now in existence and, as a paper commissioned by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Hospital Pharmacists Group (p237) points out, there are different opportunities for pharmacists at them all. However, these treatment centres require adequate staffing and although the Government initially disallowed staff movement from existing NHS organisations — bringing in staff from abroad or back from career breaks — that commitment has been relaxed in parts. There are obvious problems in store for existing hospital pharmacy departments if that continues unchecked.

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