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Fisk, M.

Published PDF deposited in [CURVE](#) March 2014

Original citation:

Fisk, M. (2014) 'Necessary Skills and Knowledge for Staff Providing Telehealth Services' in Jordanova M and Lievens F (Eds) Global Telemedicine and eHealth Updates: Knowledge Resources (7); International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISSN 1998-5509)

Publisher:

Med –e-Tel, an International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISfTeH)

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Necessary Skills and Knowledge for Staff Providing Telehealth Services

Malcolm J. Fisk¹

¹Health Design and Technology Institute, Coventry University
mfisk@cad.coventry.ac.uk

Puma Way, Coventry University Technology Park, Coventry CV1 2TT UK

Abstract:

More telehealth services are being established as frameworks for health provision in the EU are being transformed. The transformations involve not only changes in approach to service provision, but also require service staff to have appropriate knowledge and some understanding of the technologies concerned. That knowledge and understanding must include the ways in which telehealth technologies can (a) be harnessed by users - in order to give them greater control over their conditions and/or lifestyles; and (b) be deployed to support people who are dependent or vulnerable. This paper, drawing on the UK and wider European experience, sets out six skills and knowledge sets that can now appropriately apply to health and social care staff that are involved in telehealth service provision.

Introduction

The context for changes in telehealth services is set by the European Commission's eHealth Action Plan and the accompanying Staff Working Paper [1]. These set a direction that both offers the prospect of resolving some of the difficulties around health and support service provision; and should lead to new ways of thinking about the very nature of the services that are provided.

There are, of course, some barriers to the realisation of the desired outcomes. What may be 'new' telehealth services can be established according to old service norms. The staff concerned (whether health or social care) may receive little in the way of training regarding the transformative potential of telehealth and may see, therefore, such services as simply a kind of 'add on' to what already is provided. The configuration of services can, furthermore, be such that clinical goals are emphasised at the expense of goals that are concerned with wider well-being. This may, of course, be legitimate, depending on the nature of the telehealth service, but other imperatives that relate to people's greater self management may be being overlooked.

The Staff Working Paper [1] references ‘a lack of and inadequately trained and practising staff’. It makes a call for ‘improved awareness’ among healthcare professionals through the inclusion of ‘eHealth in medical curricula’ and ‘training in the workplace’. Such exhortations go a little way to indicating what is needed, but the potential contribution of social care staff to people’s health and well-being is not being sufficiently considered -. though the eHealth Action Plan itself calls for ‘healthcare and social care professionals ... to work together to achieve objectives’ relating to health and well-being.

Taking things a little further forward, however, is the need, (recognised by the European Commission in a further Staff Working Paper) for ‘forecasting health workforce and skills needs’ in the context of ‘new integrated care delivery models’ [2]. The need for new skill mixes is affirmed and member states are called upon to ‘adjust their education and training curricula ... to equip people with the right skills for the job’. The potential emergence of an EU Skills Council ‘in the area of nursing and care’ is noted. The reference to integration means that it is at least implicit that the ‘boundary’ between health and social care should be blurred and that there are health support roles that social care workers can fulfil.

The tenet of this paper is that telehealth services must harness both health and social care expertise if justice is to be done to objectives around health *and* wellbeing. In this context it becomes absolutely necessary to consider a range of new skills (or a new skill ‘mix’) that is applicable to both health and social care staff. New skills and knowledge sets in the context of telehealth services are, therefore, suggested. These draw in part on work undertaken by the author for Skills for Care and Development in the United Kingdom; take some account of ongoing work by the European Commission in the context of EU-US collaboration (where a Workforce Development Group is exploring needs for the eHealth / health IT workforce); the work of an EU eHealth Stakeholders Group that is soon to report; work within the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing; and outcomes of the Carenet project which has set out ‘domains’ of competence for both home care workers and, importantly, care recipients.

New Skills and Knowledge Sets

In the first instance it is necessary to state that, in a digital age, there is a need, as far as possible, for all people to become more digitally competent. Such ‘digital competence’ is recognised as one of the eight ‘key competences’ for lifelong learning by the European Commission [3] with it

being seen as a precondition for people to engage with not only health and support services but also with the wider world of work, social and family life.

There are basic IT and technical skills and knowledge, therefore, that are increasingly necessary. But, because of the advent of telehealth services, these must be part of the daily fare for both health and social care staff. To these 'basics' must be added a range of more specific skills and knowledge that are range from the handling of personal information to the operation of telehealth services.

Further work will be undertaken to reconcile such competencies with those that emerge from the different initiatives that are ongoing (such as those noted above). But in providing a potential framework that can embrace these, some initial skills and knowledge sets for health and social care staff are suggested below.

1. Basic Information Technology (IT)
 - a. Digital literacy (including switching, charging and the use of mobile phones)
 - b. Awareness of user benefits of IT (including the social / well-being benefits, access to information and services)
2. Personal Information
 - a. The importance of privacy and confidentiality (including the risk of breaches to the same and the ways that risks can be combated)
 - b. Protocols between agencies (whereby the sharing may take place)
 - c. Procedures for obtaining informed consent (and the related procedures that are required where there is cognitive impairments)
3. Telehealth Technologies / Equipment
 - a. Understanding the range of technologies available and how they can be procured
 - b. Knowing how to access independent advice and information regarding such technologies
 - c. Appreciating the wider range of assistive technologies within which those associated with telehealth should be considered.
4. Assessment / Self Assessment

- a. Recognising the place of telehealth within the range of services within which assessment / self-assessment can take place
 - b. Undertaking or supporting assessment (including the exploration of risks)
5. Installation, Removal and Disposal of Telehealth Technologies / Equipment
- a. Basic safety procedures
 - b. Links to power sources and Broadband networks
 - c. Fault finding and testing (per manufacturer / supplier guidance)
 - d. Cleaning, decontamination and infection control
 - e. Removal, storage and recycling
6. Telehealth Services
- a. Role and purpose of services in relation to health *and* well-being (including telehealth ‘domains’)
 - b. The fit with other services (including home care and ‘hospital at home’)
 - c. How calls are made and handled

Discussion and Conclusion

The skills and knowledge sets noted above represent a reference point by which further work can be undertaken. Such work will help to ensure that there is greater clarity about the training needs and required competencies of both health and social care workers. Such clarity is essential in a context where there is a growing number and range of telehealth services.

With greater clarity comes the potential to put frameworks in place within the EU that will not only help support the effective operation of telehealth services but it will also contribute to the closer integration of the health and social care workforces.

References

- [1] European Commission “eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020 – Innovative Healthcare for the 21st Century” Staff Working Document SWD 413 Final, Brussels 2012.
- [2] European Commission “Action Plan for EU Health Workforce” Staff Working Document SWD 93 Final, Brussels 2012.
- [3] European Commission “DIGICOMP: A Framework for Developing and Understanding Digital Competence in Europe” Joint Research Centre 2013.