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BOOK REVIEW

Clinical Knowledge and Practice in the Information Age: A Handbook for Health Professionals. Jeremy C. Wyatt. Royal Society of Medicine Press, London, 2001. 93 pp. ISBN 1-85315-483-0.

Most health professionals in practice today went through their training before the invention of the World Wide Web, before "Internet" was a household word, and before the art of Medline searching was a standard part of their curriculum. It is easy, therefore, for these professionals to feel left behind by the dizzying advancements in information technology and the knowledge resources they have brought. At the same time, practitioners are in a constant struggle, as they have always been, to keep up with the advancements in health information. This book by Wyatt is intended to provide such practitioners some practical understanding of what is out there and what it can do to help them stay current.

The book is organized into 10 brief chapters that follow a logical progression, starting with the issues of constant information needs and life-long learning before reviewing the traditional information resources (journals and textbooks). Subsequent chapters examine current issues of changing the behavior of patients (through resources written for lay public) and practitioners (through guidelines). It is in this context of the status quo and current challenges that Wyatt introduces new technologies: networks, e-mail, the World Wide Web, and clinical decision support systems.

The book is extremely well-written, avoiding jargon and defining technical terms clearly. The sequence of topics helps the book flow well, making it an easy, quick read. The coverage of each topic is intentionally broad, without getting mired with in-depth details. As such, the book provides a high-level framework to help the reader understand how information technology relates to current clinical practice. For example, in discussing decision support systems, Wyatt describes how the use of such systems can help to overcome barriers to the introduction of clinical innovations (such as a new treatment protocol) at each stage of their implementation.

Although Wyatt is understandably enthusiastic about the promise of the information age, he provides suitable balance by identifying potential problems as well. For example, in his description of the role of the Internet, he lists 10 specific negative aspects (e.g., the posting of inaccurate, biased information). While he counters each of these (for example, the use of voluntary codes of conduct), he is appropriately cautious about the lack of panaceas.

The brief format chosen for this book precludes the inclusion of many details about the technologies it presents. This will certainly frustrate some readers whose interest will be piqued by one topic or another. Although each chapter includes some references for additional reading, and there are some Web pointers to example systems and resources, additional specifics could be added without serious inflation of the text. For example, discussing literature searching can be made much more tangible by showing an example search strategy. Wyatt describes diagnostic decision support systems and their evaluation, but fails to mention the specific, commercially available systems that might be of interest to readers. Similarly, he touches briefly on the topic of electronic mail communication between clinicians and patients, but does not provide the practical guidelines suggested by Kane and Sands [1].

Although not a criticism, readers should be aware that this book is relatively UK-centric. Terms such as "the commissioner's perspective" (without identifying a commission or commissioner) and "high street chemists" (a common information resource for patients; presumably not a reference to intoxicated drug dealers) may leave American's somewhat confused. In addition, many of the descriptions of health care institutions and policies are specific to the National Health Service; U.S. readers will need to do some extrapolation to more familiar analogues.

This book is not a reference, but a first source for health professionals interested in learning more about information technology. It necessarily leaves many questions unanswered, but it provides a good outline for framing those questions. Informatics professionals, who are confronted by bewildered, less technically knowledgeable colleagues, may

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find this book to be a useful primer to help stimulate productive discussion.

REFERENCE

1. Kane B, Sands DZ. Guidelines for the clinical use of electronic mail with patients. The AMIA Internet Working Group, Task Force on Guidelines for the Use of Clinic-Patient Electronic Mail. J Am Med Inform Assoc 1998 Jan-Feb; 5(1):104–11.

James J. Cimino
Department of Medical Informatics
Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons
New York, New York
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