Reading about

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Computers in psychiatry

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'Computers in psychiatry' is not an easy topic to recommend reading material for. It can be difficult to find information that is up to date. Most textbooks are dated by the time they are published and this is particularly true in an area that is developing rapidly, such as computers and information technology (IT). Therefore, many of the better information sources are to be found in journal and magazine articles. There is up-to-date information available electronically on the Internet; although this is fine for the initiated it can be difficult for interested novice to access.

Psychiatrists may find texts on IT difficult to engage with. They are often patronisingly simple or incomprehensible (because of overly technical language laden with jargon). Computers are a practical subject, to be explored and used, rather than to be read about. Many people would not want to read theories about the internal combustion engine – they would rather drive their car.

For most psychiatrists, being interested in IT means wanting to do something useful with the box sitting on their desk, at home or in their office. For information managers, being interested in IT means managing information systems for whole organisations.

Personal computing

Individual clinicians may wish to read about personal computers (PCs), related hardware, such as printers or modems, and useful software programs. Often advice is needed about what hardware and software should be purchased in the first place. Providing advice for those purchasing hardware is difficult. Everyone's needs are different, and people have different levels of ability (so it is difficult to know how to target advice) and the technology itself changes exceedingly rapidly. In general it is best to go to your own IT Department or to someone with experience and ask their advice, in order to decide what you require.

If you need to know more about particular hardware and software, then the IT magazines are probably the best place to look. All of the leading publications produce highly technical reviews on particular products, but also have more general features which can be a good introduction to a topic (see references).

Once you have purchased software, there are usually user manuals provided. These are variable in quality. Increasingly, instead of written manuals, help is provided from within the program itself. This is often context sensitive (in that the help given is relevant to the task you are attempting at the time). Inexperienced users often do not use the 'help' facility as frequently as they might. There are additional books available, such as the '. . . *for Dummies*' series, (Rathbone, 1995), which can provide more readable sources of information.

The National Health Service (NHS) does have training material aimed at information management and technology (IM&T) professions, and is increasing its stock of products aimed specifically at clinical professionals. Unfortunately, they do not utilise paper-based systems to communicate these things anymore; instead there are a variety of regional fairs and a Web site (if you can gain access) bringing all of these things together. This includes a mention of a Gateway to Healthy Informatics for Teaching (GIFT), an initiative providing teaching resources in the area (http://www.chime.ucl.ac.uk/cgi-bin/gift).

The Internet

Accessing the Internet and using e-mail is potentially one of the most useful functions of computers for psychiatrists. The Internet is an invaluable source of information on psychiatry (and life) in general. There is a certain catch to this in that if one cannot access the Internet in the first place, one cannot access the information. There are a number of good general introductory texts for the Internet, for example *The New Internet Navigator* (Gilster, 1995). This includes a history of the development of the Internet, e-mail, user groups and useful addresses of Web pages. A more specific medical view is provided by *Medicine and the Internet* (McKenzie, 1997). This has a good introduction to the whole topic of personal computing, covers the Internet and includes a chapter extolling the virtues of electronic communications for psychiatrists, and is highly recommended. There have been a number of good articles in medical journals on the Internet. The *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* has recently published an excellent series on a variety of Internet topics, for example: 'How to get medical information from the Internet' (Kiley, 1997). The *British Medical Journal* publishes a regular column, 'Netlines' (Pullen, 1997), which is good for interesting Web pages. For those using the Internet, the best source of information about different Web pages is often found from links from other Web pages.

Clinical applications

There are a few specific psychiatric CD-ROMs. Some publishers have a list of those currently available (Wisepress, 1997). Timms & Harrison (1998) recently reviewed a CD-ROM version of the *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* by Kaplan & Sadock. There are also a number of software programs available to psychiatrists and their patients for a variety of purposes including managing anxiety, treating spider phobias or providing private practice invoices. There is no comprehensive source of reviews of such psychiatric software available in written form as far as we are aware; the best place is the 'Computers in Mental Health Internet Forum' facilitated by Dr Martin Briscoe, which includes various reviews on such products (http://www.ex.ac.uk/cimh).

Psychiatrists often have the need to be informed on the relative benefits of the various psychiatric patient administration

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systems. Regrettably there is again a paucity of written material available. The Royal College of Psychiatrists College Research Unit published a review some years ago, which is now out of date. There are catalogues available (Silicon Bridge Research, 1996), listing the providers and details of such software, although these are expensive, limited in the information provided and probably best obtained via an information department.

Information management and technology (IM&T)

IM&T is the phrase most commonly used as the umbrella term covering all things IT-related in the NHS. Everything from telemedicine, imaging and the World Wide Web through to the PC on your desk (what it is, what it does, how it works and how it should be used) is covered by this phrase.

The NHS has an 'IM&T strategy' which is intended to cover all major elements of IT use and information management processes crucial to operation within NHS organisations. The current strategy was launched in 1993 and is due for replacement this year. It is probably not very useful to go into the strategy in any great depth, suffice to say that it aims to be promoting systems that are: "supporting the clinician at the point of delivery of care and allowing management information to be generated as a by product" (NHS Executive Information Management Group, 1993). This strategy has had a degree of success, and, if nothing else, has played a major role in moving the NHS away from a 'bean counting' paradigm (where bed-days and finished consultant episodes were the measurements of choice) to a more person-centred approach to systems.

If you want to understand the national IM&T issues in the NHS at present, then the strategy itself is available from the centre (NHS Executive Information Management Group, 1993). Progress reports on some of the projects are also available from the centre, although they make very dry reading.

Some recent publications have targeted specific mental health issues, such as use of outcome measures and patient groupings (case mix). Psychiatrists may find much of this too 'schematic' and/or structural, but if you have a methodological mind (and an hour or two to spare), then it is well worth reading the latest on resource groupings (Elphick *et al*, 1997). There is a new CMDS (contract minimum data set) proposed for mental health services, the formal data that trusts have to send to the centre (including health authorities and/or the Department of Health) to show or 'measure' their business. The new data set will fundamentally shape the development of systems for mental health services. The CMDS has had a number of versions since its initial appearance and the latest report has just been released (available from the Project Office at the Department of Health, Wellington House, SE1).

Examples of papers written focusing on elements of the national IM&T strategy, providing a view of how systems might, or can, be developed in this informatics' environment include: Simpson (1997) – on contracting currencies, Smith (1997) – on how evidence-based medicine can be integrated into current systems, Taylor & Allgar (1997) – on integrating clinical records with database management systems, and Wise *et al* (1996) – on the development of patient information systems.

Special studies of the national IM&T status of trusts across the country have been carried out by the National Audit Office (or Audit Commission; Audit Commission (1995*a, b* & 1997)). These offer clear expositions of the current issues and problems providers face, as well as some interesting case studies featuring specific trusts.

Relating IM&T to management and clinical processes is vital if IT is to be directed appropriately and in order for organisations to correctly relate to it. In terms of health service management processes read Keen (1994) and Thornicroft & Strathdee (1996). For more clinical views, including more extensive explanations of IM&T issues, and elaboration on direct application and use of IT (for research), we recommend Bisson & Baggaley (1995), Glover (1996), Jones (1997*a, b*) and Wing (1995).

Other health-related IM&T issues appear regularly in health journals, for instance, Lopatin & Blagden (1997), for library sources, and Cross (1998) for European patient cards.

Information Technology in Nursing and Other Healthcare Professionals is a good journal specifically covering IM&T issues of relevance for psychiatrists. The *Nursing Specialist Group of the British Computer Society* (ISSN: 0956–5159) publishes good themed articles, including glossaries, and clear IM&T features, with a wider relevance and appeal than just for nurses. The group (NSG) is one of, if not the, most active British Computer Society health groups. The annual conferences are worth attending for clinicians and IM&T professionals alike.

The *British Journal of Healthcare Computing and Information Management* (ISSN 0265–5217) is the main health service IM&T journal and has good material, although it tends towards a technical and managerial perspective.

Occasionally specific health-orientated IM&T textbooks are produced that provide useful introductions and explanations about technology (Burnard, 1993; Leonard, 1996; Walace, 1996, 1997) and from time to time the press, or specialist journals, produce useful IT 'specials' (Gibbs, 1997). These, when well done, can offer much in terms of the wider view of the potential for IT now and in the future.

Conclusion

In the rapidly changing world of IT, and in a complex health environment, it is almost impossible to meet the needs of all readers – however, we have tried to reflect the diversity of literature available as best we can. The article should provide a starter for either the interested IT amateur, or the committed clinician needing to locate material expanding on specialised IM&T areas relevant to mental health.

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