



Reasons why disbursements lag behind the commitment of funds include lack of management staff at field level, availability of health personnel, storage and distribution capacities, and sufficient diagnostic services. Moreover there are concerns about the absorptive capacities of aid flows to countries, due to the associated institutional constraints.

The donor community and recipient countries have never before faced the triple dilemma of high dollar commitments and constrained disbursement levels against finite absorptive capacity rates. Effectively managing this triple threat may be as daunting as is the global fight against AIDS, TB and malaria.

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PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN PRACTICE: COMMUNICATIONS

There is no doubt that information technology (IT) and information is very much part of our lives today. Several different areas can be supported by technology and provide a health practitioner with a comprehensive infrastructure for a practice (Fig. 1). Over the next 3 months we will review all of these areas (except infrastructure -- due to the rapid changes at this level, the basic approach should be to define the IT applications that the practice requires and to purchase the most current infrastructure that can be afforded).

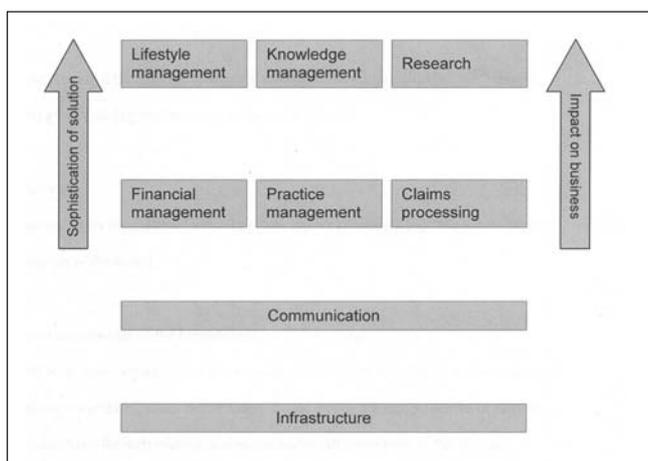


Fig. 1. IT in health care practice.

Communications

Electronic communication, both internal and external, is one of the basic necessities of a modern business and there are several mechanisms that can both simplify and enhance management of a practice. These are:

- e-mail and e-fax

- calendaring and scheduling (C&S)
- short message service (SMS)
- document management.

Because the use of the Internet features in most of these communication mechanisms, accessing and utilising the Internet will be described first.

The Internet

The Internet is an international network of computers connected together across almost all countries of the world. The main components of the Internet are:

- World wide web (www), which is a vast resource of more than eighty million pages of information in graphic, audio and/or video format. Pages are representative of anything from individuals through clubs, associations and small companies to the largest corporations. Through building in links to other software systems, e-commerce (buying and selling through the Internet) has also become possible. The language of the Internet is HTML (HyperText Markup Language) and the network system by which data are transmitted is HTTP (HyperText Transmission Protocol).
- Newsgroups and message boards, which allow a degree of interaction between visitors to a site. There are many thousands of newsgroups available, which are grouped according to content and within them are many messages. Some groups are moderated, in that somebody takes it upon himself or herself to edit or censor the content.
- Chatrooms, which allow live interaction between Internet users. When one person enters a comment and presses the enter key, the comment is simultaneously displayed on the screens of all the participants in the chat session, regardless of where they are in the world.

E-mail and e-fax

Basic e-mail consists of sending and receiving text-based messages across an electronic network. E-mail can be sent within a practice across a local area network (LAN), but will more often take place across the Internet. E-mail can also be used to distribute electronic files of various sorts, including word processor documents, spreadsheets and digital photographs.

E-fax consists of using e-mail infrastructure to send and receive faxes electronically. One of the biggest advantages of e-fax is that faxes don't have to be printed out before being sent, and incoming faxes are available in electronic format for storage online, rather than just on paper.

Some of the key uses of e-mail and e-fax in the health care industry are:

- communication with partners or associated professionals and organisations



- notification of test and examination results, e.g. specialists to GPs
- communication with hospitals, clinics and other institutions
- telemedicine.

Calendaring and scheduling

Calendaring and scheduling (C&S) is the ability to electronically manage one's own diary on a PC, and also to co-ordinate one's diary with that of others. It is possible, for instance, to create an appointment in a diary, send out an invitation to attend the meeting to someone else, and automatically have their diary and one's own updated with their response.

Where C&S comes into its own though, is in larger practices. Multiple diaries can be maintained, and appointments can be coordinated into the booking schedules of rooms or equipment.

True C&S requires integration of e-mail and calendar software, and this must be borne in mind when setting up these facilities. At present the main contenders in this market are Lotus Notes and Microsoft Exchange.

Short message service

The pager was one of the most popular means of remaining reachable, used by health care professionals. However, given the pervasive nature of cellular telephones, it makes sense that

the phone replaced the pager. The short message service (SMS) available for the GSM-standard cellular phones enables this.

Document management

One of the biggest handicaps to effective operating in any type of business is the management of documents. The paperless office seems to be getting further and further away, rather than closer. As the amount of information that has to be managed in a practice grows and becomes more diverse, the task of managing it effectively becomes more of a challenge.

Document management falls into three basic categories:

- storage of historical documents that may have to be retrieved at some time
- sharing of documents
- management of the flow of documents.

Lotus Notes is considered a leader in the field of document management software. Notes databases would be set up for a practice, one for each category of information. Examples could be patient information, medicines dispensed, suppliers, specialists and so on. Any documents that fall into any of those categories would be stored in the corresponding database.

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