Support innovative products and devices to avoid a funding crisis

As the ageing population increases, nurses need to work with NHS managers to provide patients with cost effective care at home using assistive technology, says Christopher Harris.

The NHS must find ways of caring for older people in their own homes if it is to manage the rising costs of care provision for the ageing population. By 2020 some 50% of people in the UK will be over 50; demand for acute inpatient beds could outstrip supply if we cannot provide cheaper care for people in the community.

More than 15 million people in the UK live with long term conditions. Many rely on assistive technology (AT) to help manage their condition. AT is a broad field and not necessarily synonymous with telehealth or telecare; rather, it is any device or technology that helps people to perform tasks more independently, regain some control over certain aspects of their lives and assist them with daily living. It can range from complex communication aids or environmental controls (such as devices to turn lights on or off) to less sophisticated, but no less useful, devices, such as mobility or eating and drinking products.

New technologies can improve health and wellbeing significantly by enabling independence and allowing patients to remain active in their own homes. This is something we would wish for ourselves and our families but often health professionals do not make maximum use of AT due to problems with healthcare provision. Some NHS trust processes result in a restricted supply of AT to patients and health professionals who use or prescribe it are often not those who decide whether to provide these technologies. In many instances decisions are based on how much the technology costs rather than its impact on users.

“Silo budgeting” is another major barrier. Many companies develop innovative devices and technologies that meet unmet clinical need, which are used effectively and endorsed by users and professionals, only to find their products are not widely purchased. This is because it is often difficult to spend more in one budget on devices, even though this might significantly reduce the overall health budget. NHS trusts, managers and healthcare staff need to work together to find a solution to the “not my budget” problem.

Devices for Dignity Healthcare Technology Co-operative (D4D) is a National Institute for Health Research programme, set up to drive forward innovative new products, processes and services to help those with debilitating conditions deal with daily challenges. It works with inventors, clinical and healthcare staff, industry, academics and patients to bring solutions to areas of patient need. It is unique in that it has a national focus and can provide hands on support to innovators, rather than simply pointing in the right direction. This means D4D can speed up the process from ideation to market. Specifically interested in adopting and diffusing technology, D4D is conducting research to help develop a blueprint that may address some of the issues mentioned. But this can only be achieved if all parties involved accept they each have a part to play in providing a more efficient and cost effective approach to how innovation is exploited.

D4D supports the Nursing Times Product Awards and encourages health professionals to nominate companies that have provided devices that have improved their or their patients’ care.

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