

# IN THE BACK



## NHS DATA

### The IT crowd

**R**ECENT cyber attacks on the NHS raise the question of whether its IT is in safe hands. A look at its senior computer bods is hardly reassuring.

NHS England's top techie is chief information officer Will Smart, brought in last year from the Royal Free London NHS Trust in Hampstead, where he was in charge of its systems. The promotion surprised many who had witnessed one of the more blatant failings of NHS data security. For the Royal Free had just received a major bollocking from the government's "national data guardian", Dame Fiona Caldicott. This came after it sent "1.6m identifiable patient records to Google DeepMind", the internet search company's artificial intelligence arm that was testing an app related to kidney injury. Said Dame Fiona: "It would not have been within the reasonable expectation of patients that their records would have been shared for this purpose."

Smart reports to NHS England's national director for operations and information, Matthew Swindells, who arrived last year after five years with US IT company Cerner, a name familiar to *Eye* readers. It was one of the main software suppliers under the disastrous £12.4bn national programme for IT, teaming up with BT to install its systems across major London trusts. Among its victims was the Royal Free, whose chief executive resigned in 2009 after complaining of the millions wasted on the IT.

The national programme was scrapped after years of delay, but the firms responsible still benefit from NHS cash. Last year Swindell's outfit selected 16 "exemplar" acute hospital trusts to receive up to £10m to experiment with new digital products. Of these, six happened to be using Cerner software (a far higher proportion than across acute hospitals generally). Originally just nine trusts, including the six Cerner ones, were selected but the scheme was expanded following lobbying from other IT leaders.

"Centrally picking one supplier, with a handful of others thrown in for window dressing," one told *DigitalHealth* magazine, "is repeating the worst mistakes of the National Programme for IT."

One of the supposed "exemplar" trusts is Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Trust. Despite big financial troubles, it bought a new £200m patient record system (from another US company in 2014) but the system soon collapsed, forcing the trust to declare a "major incident". Its chief executive Keith McNeil resigned the following year. Less than a year later, and again to some astonishment, he joined NHS England at the same time as Will Smart, as chief clinical information officer.

Health IT continues to provide a rich gravy train. Latest aboard is Neil Griffiths, deputy chief executive of University College London Hospitals NHS Trust and responsible for its IT. Only this month he and the rest of his board approved a £12m contract with US firm Teletracking for what seems a less than urgently needed "coordination centre" project to track bed and equipment use electronically. Griffiths has subsequently resigned from the trust before taking a new job with... Teletracking.

In the fragmented world of health IT procurement, the NHS England trust suits are "clients" of a central body now called NHS Digital. This commissions the major programmes and is the starting point for ensuring that NHS computer systems are safe. For this it has a cyber security committee, which has acquired a renewed importance in recent weeks.

It is chaired by Sir Ian Andrews, who in 2013 had to resign as chairman of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (now part of the National Crime Agency). When a parliamentary committee began questioning why SOCA had not investigated allegations of corporate espionage by private intelligence firms, Sir Ian failed to declare that his wife was head lawyer at one of the largest ones.



From top: Smart, Swindells, McNeil, Griffiths, Andrews

## DISABILITY

### Confidence trick

**D**EFINITE proof arrives that the government's "Disability Confident" scheme is not worth the paper certificates it issues to those considered good employers when it comes to disabled people (*Eyes passim*).

It has emerged that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which relaunched the scheme in November, awarded itself the top "gold standard" as an employer of disabled people – just days before a UN committee accused it of "grave or systematic violations" of the rights of those with disabilities.

The UN found that DWP ministers had "regularly portrayed" disabled people as "being dependent or making a living out of benefits, committing fraud as benefit claimants, being lazy and putting a burden on taxpayers".

To be fair to the DWP, to achieve the top "Disability Confident leader" status its self-assessment had to be independently validated by the Business Disability Forum (BDF), a not-for-profit company which aims to promote those with disabilities in the workplace. (The two lower levels of credentials require only tick-box self-assessment.) The BDF lauded the DWP for offering guaranteed interviews to disabled candidates, for taking part in the Ambitious About Autism work experience scheme, and for having an established framework for making adjustments for disabled staff.

Shame, then, about last year's Cabinet Office survey which found that more than 1,400 disabled DWP civil servants said they had faced discrimination in the workplace – an increase of nearly a quarter on the previous year.

## PROBATION

### Record breakers

**M**ORE bad news for the National Probation Service (NPS), as leaked emails reveal big problems in intelligence sharing between probation teams in London and the Metropolitan Police. They indicate that probation chiefs are not renewing a key contract with Inspector Knacker that allows access to police national computer records (PNCs) of dangerous offenders.

The contract, set up in 2015, covered services in London, the South-east and the East of England. With the probation service's own pisspoor nDelius records (*Eyes passim*) often unreliable, up-to-date PNCs are seen as vital for court-based probation officers to enable them to write pre-sentence reports, and for prosecutors to present cases effectively in court when offenders breach their probation terms. The emails reveal that the contract came at "substantial cost to probation".

When asked if the move was a cost-cutting exercise, a Ministry of Justice spokesman said: "We do not comment on commercial contracts." Thus any suggestion that the move is related to the hundreds of millions of taxpayer pounds so far wasted on the computer system that is meant to digitise and link the courts, probation and police is purely coincidental.

## BREXIT

### Drug bust

**M**ORE on the departure of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) from the UK following Britain's decision to leave the European Union (see *Eye* 1432).

Even diehard Brexiteers may find it hard to put a positive spin on the EMA's move. Firstly, under the EU's Brexit "negotiating directives", the UK must pay the costs of the relocation because it is the UK's fault the agency has to move. UK taxpayers will thus have to buy the agency out of its lease with Canary Wharf Group, which is owned by Qatari and Bermuda-based investors. Under a deal signed in 2011, when Brexit was just a twinkle in Nigel Farage's eye, that lease runs until 2039, and no termination clause was included. The expected cost is about £300m. *Oops!*

More complex and problematic, however, is that the EMA, which oversees the authorisation of medicines in the EU, is also at the centre of a European web of "pharmacovigilance" – the monitoring of drugs to prevent any nasty surprises.

EU law requires companies that sell medicines in the EU to designate a

so-called QPPV – a qualified person for pharmacovigilance. That person must be based in the European single market, which Theresa May is determined to leave. There are about 150 QPPVs in the UK, who now face their functions being shifted to other EU countries.

Behind every QPPV, there are often very large teams, meaning the impact of Brexit will be multiplied far beyond the 150 contact people. In preparation for the post-Brexit world, companies must decide to what extent they should move their EU-related pharmacovigilance activities out of the UK. Such decisions could be tough on British specialists in the field – the way things are going, they may no longer have the right to work in another EU country after 2019.

Beyond the potential human disruption, pharma companies worry that the UK will be cut off from the EMA's databases and networks, in particular its pharmacovigilance risk assessment committee, which the UK currently chairs. The big fear is that patient safety will be put at risk because barriers to information sharing will go up. If concerns are raised in, say, Spain about adverse reactions to a medicine, which in the current system would be notified to all other EU countries, the UK might be late in hearing about it and would be outside the discussions of what to do about it.