

Chapter 11

Nursing, Information Technology and the Humanization of Health Care

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ABSTRACT

The troubling question is posed of how to integrate new technology in nursing in a manner that will lead to use that has congruence with the nursing mission. The context of healthcare delivery is discussed through reference to Foucault's notion of 'governmentality'. The challenge is presented to nursing to critically think through the issues to enable development of voice to influence the healthcare policy agenda in the area of informatics.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the other chapters of this text readers have been introduced to various narratives or 'stories' that implicitly and explicitly portray nursing informatics in a generally positive light. While there is no doubt that information technology has become critically important to improvements in health care including nursing in recent decades, we want to ask whether there is a darker side to such developments. Accordingly, this chapter adopts a 'troubling' and 'troublesome' stance in relation to issues surrounding information technology use in nursing practice; asking whether there are losses

that accompany the apparent gains, or risks that accompany the purported benefits frequently anticipated in the professional and policy literature addressing the field.

The chapter is set out as follows. In the next section we outline why it is important to adopt a critical stance in relation to questions surrounding the increasing use of information technology in nursing. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of information technology on human communication and social interaction more broadly. The main purpose here is to consider the social, cultural and political contexts within which such developments are having an impact on health care generally and nursing specifically. Attention then turns to a consideration of issues that have

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been identified in the policy and professional literature on nursing and information technology. The latter sections of the chapter then introduce two frameworks for critiquing the impact of information technology on nursing practice. The first draws on recent work addressing the ways in which the work practices of nurses (and other health professionals) can either promote or detract from humanizing values in health care, addressing this in relation to issues surrounding the use of information technology in nursing. The second draws on Michel Foucault's seminal work on 'governmentality', applying this to an analysis of the 'problem' of information technology in health care as constituted by government officials and health authorities. A brief summary of main points is provided at the end of the chapter.

WHY ADOPT A TROUBLING/ TROUBLESOME STANCE TO NURSING INFORMATICS?

The authors of this chapter have received training in both nursing and sociology. While a background in nursing may provide insights into the ways in which information technology can bring substantial improvements to health care, being grounded in sociology can socialize one into asking challenging, even troublesome questions about a topic of interest. For instance, are there costs accompanying the benefits often associated with developments in information technology? In this chapter we want to ask questions about what are otherwise taken for granted ideas, values and social relations surrounding the development and increasing use of information technology in nursing.

At the outset it is important to make it clear that we are not against the use of information technology in nursing. We are both regular users of email; both own mobile phones; and frequently use the internet to assist with research and teaching. Our primary purpose is to raise 'inconvenient

facts' (Dean, 2010: 48, citing Weber, 1972: 152), so as to incite critical thought on the implications of increasing reliance on information technology in nursing specifically and health care more generally. We want to prompt nurses and other health workers to reflect on the implications of making informatics a central component of the caring enterprise.

Our interest in nursing and information technology follows on from previous work which raised questions regarding ongoing human rights violations perpetrated against people with mental health problems and disorders (Morrall & Hazelton, 2004). This work pointed to the ways in which mental health services have become much more security conscious in many countries; how risk management seems to be overtaking therapeutic concerns in our psychiatric services and institutions (Hazelton & Morrall, 2009). Information communication technologies are central to this new psychiatric security infrastructure, with, for instance, closed circuit television monitoring and electronic staff duress alarms being added to more traditional security measures such as locked windows and doors and containment fences. Just as we have pondered the implications of using technology to 'solve' security problems in mental health care, so do we now want to turn a critical eye to the implications of using informatics in solve problems in health care more generally.

SOCIETY, THE SELF AND INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

A useful starting point for the critique that follows is with a broad consideration of the social, cultural and political contexts within which developments in health information communication technology are taking place. In his famous insight that 'the medium is the message' McLuhan (1964) noted the ways in which the form of communication may influence the meaning and importance of

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