

Debate: Should the NHS provide free access to wi-fi?

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Free internet access should be rolled out across NHS premises because it is essential for better decision making and outcomes for patients, argues Victoria Betton, mHabitat programme director at Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

The UK government's report 'Personalised Health and Care 2020' proposes a framework for [digital technology](#) that aims to improve [patient experience](#) and outcomes with efficient services.

But "this bold ambition can be realised only with digitally engaged citizens and the removal of barriers such as lack of access to public wi-fi in [healthcare settings](#)", argues Betton in *The BMJ* this week.

According to Ofcom, 93% of UK adults have a mobile phone and 61% have a smartphone, but many owners cannot afford the data plans for [internet access](#) outside their homes. Around 69% of people use the internet to find [health information](#).

Free wi-fi across NHS premises would enable patients to access online health information and encourage support and shared decision making through access to medical mobile apps and digital personal health records, she explains.

Bidding for social housing can be done online and free hospital wi-fi would also help patients to carry on with every day life, keep in touch with work, family and friends, provide entertainment, and more.

Public wi-fi is increasingly being rolled out across the NHS. Examples include 'DigiWards', a project funded by NHS Widening Digital Participation, that provides [free wi-fi](#), prescribed smart devices for patients, and teaching of digital skills, such as online shopping.

The Sloane Medical Centre general practice in Sheffield helps patients to use the internet, find out more about their health, book appointments and order repeat prescriptions.

But wi-fi in hospitals is an "unaffordable luxury" that would "adversely affect" the relationship between the NHS and its staff, patients and the public, argues Grant Ingrams, deputy chair, IT subcommittee of the BMA General Practitioners Committee.

NHS resources are insufficient with a predicted deficit of nearly £30bn a year by 2020-21, he explains, adding that it would be "unethical" to divert money from front line clinical services or other technological needs to a service that would be mainly used for entertainment.

Patients and members of the public may come into the hospital to use these facilities and lead to overcrowding, and the slow running of services, he explains. In addition, dealing with issues about filtering and logging on, for example, "will take staff away from their main role of looking after patients' needs."

Instead of free wi-fi, any additional investment should be used to improve patient safety and efficiency, he argues.

Problems with primary care IT systems "urgently need to be tackled" to put the UK at the forefront of information technology systems in healthcare, particularly the transfer of records between practices, technologies to enable mobile working and the implementation of an improved coding system, he adds.

More information: Head to head: Should all NHS premises provide free access to wi-fi? www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.h4098

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