
Mental health and early cancer detection aims of NHS and space tech collaboration



The deadline is approaching for submissions to a multi-million-pound initiative for innovative ideas using space tech to solve healthcare problems.

To celebrate the 70th anniversary of the UK National Health Service (NHS), the UK Space Agency has launched a 4-billion-pound joint initiative with the NHS for healthcare innovators who can demonstrate how technology originally designed for space could be used to improve treatment and care. Previous endeavours to adapt space tech for medical applications include the development of a “pill camera” that can be swallowed by patients to diagnose gut problems, and slippers containing GPS sensors to help track dementia sufferers. The current challenges? Managing long-term conditions, earlier diagnosis of cancer, meeting mental health needs and transforming primary care services.

“Space tech has been used in healthcare for decades,” Emily Gravestock, Head of Applications Strategy at the UK Space Agency told HealthManagement.org. “As the opportunities from space have become cheaper and better understood non-experts have had the knowledge and ability to bring them into everyday products. This initiative started where we always try and start – with the customer at the centre.”

There are four categories contestants have to work within (long term conditions management, earlier diagnosis of cancer, transformation of GP and other primary care services and meeting mental health needs). Simon Stevens, the Chief Executive of NHS England came up with these topics as those that would make the biggest impact to both patients and staff if there could be technological support.

The funding for the call is coming through the UK’s investment in the European Space Agency Business Applications programme – in which the UK is the European leader. ESA staff will therefore be involved in assisting in the evaluation of the ideas, the consideration of the technology and acting as Technical Officers for the project, helping it to go from a gem of an idea into a delivered commercial product which can be procured. Ideas which are not selected for the NHS programme can transfer to the ESA for the standard Business Application, offering a chance for development regardless of the outcome of the proposal call.

Panels will sift the ideas in October, followed by face-to-face pitches for the best ideas in each topic area in November. Winners will be announced following those events.

Source: NHS/UK Space Agency
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