The Politics of Tech Adoption in Healthcare

A new report looking into the development and use of emerging technologies, notably artificial intelligence (AI), for healthcare has revealed concerns among some clinicians as to the real reason behind tech adoption.

Within the NHS, the adoption of AI and other data-driven technologies is largely based on a "political or commercial imperative" instead of being aimed at improving care, according to a dozen of clinicians who were interviewed for the report published by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

The report, "Patient AI", examined how the introduction of emerging technologies was "influencing commissioning and clinical practice" across the NHS. The paper essentially outlined the work done by the RSA in collaboration with NHSX, the unit for digital, data and technology in healthcare.

Such "embedded scepticism" points to the need of making various stakeholders understand and agree on the purposes for the use of new tools and systems within the NHS, according to the RSA, which interviewed professionals involved in the development, procurement and use of data-driven technologies for the health service in England.

You may also like: Brexit: Wreaking Havoc in Healthcare

As noted by interviewees, a number of challenges in integrating new tools stemmed from the fact that the NHS did not see itself as a "digital organisation".

"For example, someone who has cancer, the best care is given by multidisciplinary teams, but that's not what we do around technology," one CCIO, who called for multidisciplinary team working, was quoted as saying. "We put the technology people in a room out on another site, in a different part of the hospital and the clinicians in different part."

What is needed is to break down some of those silos and bring different groups – "the technologists, the clinical transformation, quality improvement" – together in a multidisciplinary team, the CCIO pointed out.

To address these challenges, the RSA offers these key recommendations:

- Patient adoption is crucial to the successful integration of radical technologies, such as AI, in the health system – and is key to creating a genuine culture of innovation in the NHS.

- Evidence is essential, as both clinicians and patients trust interventions that build from a robust evidence base. Piloting and sandbox-style initiatives can help overcome multiple residual issues around tech implementation.

- Create a network of "clinical AI champions" that would help shift attitudes and practices and provide inspiration to others so as to collectively build a culture of innovation in the health service.