

Continua Flesh Out eHealth Plans

Sometime in 2008 we should see wireless healthcare devices that adhere to Continua's standards of performance and interoperability – so said David Whitlinger, Intel's Director of Healthcare Device Standards and Interoperability and also President of The Continua Health Alliance. Between then and now there will be analysis of 'use cases' and a certification system put in place.

Large companies such as Intel and Philips Electronics (also a Continua member) like standards – they create a more uniform market and, if you get your standard in first, they give you an edge over smaller more nimble rivals. Even so there is consensus amongst customers and vendors alike that something needs to be done to tame the wild west that the market for wireless medical devices has become. Philips sees the medical device market becoming part of the consumer electronics market and Intel see it as part of their digit home concept. A range of other vendors are there for a various of reasons. One member, the UK based telecare equipment and service vendor Tunstall, must already know something about standards and interoperability as, according to the company's chief technology officer Steve Sadler, it already monitors two thirds of the 1.5 million people who are currently being monitored remotely. They build systems using combinations of their own and third party devices.

The presentation opened with the obligatory preamble about healthcare providers about to become overwhelmed by a tidal wave of elderly people, one billion sufferers of obesity related diseases and 860 million chronically ill patients – not to mention the rest of the population who are defined as the 'worried well.' Continua then showed presented their take on how care would look in the future. This was very much an extension of the digital home. A daughter checking up on her father, an angina sufferer, using a videophone that doubled up as both a medical terminal and a hub for a range of wireless devices. Every time the father stood on the bathroom scales or opened a bottle of pills data would be relayed to a control centre where a carer would 'manage' the patient's condition. Every so often the carer would place a video call to the patient to let him know the medication regime was being changed or to reprimand him for not exercising.

So far so good except that even if this patient, who required only the minimum of care was taking enough of the carer's time to run up a bill of over \$2000 per year – to which would be added the cost of the equipment and communications. Of course this is not something that directly concerns Continua. Health providers around the world are pushing care out to the edge of their health provision networks so the edge is a good place to start work on standards and to gain a strategic foothold. However it dose not matter how well you cook a bagel there will still be a hole in the middle.

What happens in that hole is down to people like Dr Mike Bainbridge, Clinical Architect for the NHS Connecting for Health programme. He outlined what the programme is doing in terms of building core infrastructure, in particular the electronic patient records, that will need to

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be in place to support services such as remote care. Even when what is being termed 'the spine' is in place the NHS are not going to be too pleased at having a stream of data from the 'worried well' or even the 'rather tubby and a bit peaky' dumped onto it. These are the people that, to date, health providers have, in order to keep costs down, made a very good job of ignoring.

In this respect it is interesting that IBM, who are toying around with concepts such as automated personal healthcare and seem to be incorporating some elements of it in their Healthcare@Home patient-centred grid based ehealth project, is a member of Continua. Unfortunately the company did not send a representative to the presentation to tell its side of the story.

Also absent was Roche, the only pharmaceutical company signed up with Continua to date – and one suspects this is the device division rather than the pill department. A key element of the concept presented by Continua was the monitoring of medication and it is difficult to see how standards and interoperability can be introduced here without input from the pharmaceutical sector.

Beyond that however Continua represents a good starting point and will no doubt bring order to the wireless medical device market - it has certainly given a number of smaller vendors, such as Polar Electro, pause for thought. The standards that Continua introduce over the next two years are certain to play a key role in the consolidation of the medical device market – good news for investors in small companies looking for an exit strategy.

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