e-learning speeds up referral times for patients with symptoms of cancer

Online training can have a positive impact on the speed at which doctors refer patients with suspected cancer to specialist services according to findings from Doctors.net.uk, the leading provider of free education and communication services for the medical community.

Working on behalf of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), Doctors.net.uk delivered an online interactive, educational programme to GPs across the UK based on the recommendations from the NICE guidelines on referral of patients with suspected cancer. To gauge the impact of such training, Doctors.net.uk carried out a pre-and post training survey with GPs to assess their awareness of the NICE guidelines and their attitudes and adherence to them.

The survey showed that 85 per cent of GPs who took part in the online programme would follow the NICE recommendation of referring a patient to specialist services within 24 hours if they suspected they might have cancer. Participation in the programme reduced the average referral time from 1.7 days to 1.3 days.

GPs with no training in the guidelines were more likely to delay referring patients for longer periods, with eight per cent saying they would wait for over seven days before referring compared to just two per cent of GPs who took part in the training.

Dr Tim Ringrose, Director of Professional Relations at Doctors.net.uk, explains: "Doctors.net.uk was challenged by NICE to prove that e-learning works. The results show unequivocally that Doctors.net.uk’s case-based e-learning is not only popular with doctors but is a highly effective route to maximise the implementation of guidelines into practice."

The survey also found that following online training, significantly more GPs found the NICE guidelines useful, 80 per cent compared to 57 per cent.

Commenting on the study findings, Dr Gillian Leng, Implementation Systems Director at NICE, said: "I am very pleased with the positive impact this educational tool had on GPs' understanding of the cancer referral guidance. In future we will aim to develop e-learning products for selected pieces of NICE guidance where there appears to be a particular need to support healthcare professionals' understanding."

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Notes to the Editor
The findings were gained by carrying out two structured online surveys amongst General Practitioners who are members of the Doctors.net.uk community.

Wave 1 of the research took place prior to the launch of the educational modules relating the NICE cancer guidelines, 202 respondents participated in this phase of the research.

Wave 2 of the research took place amongst members of the community who had participated in the NICE guidelines education modules which had been made available on the Doctors.net.uk website. This phase covered the same target sample size of 200 GPs who had completed one or more modules.

Summary of survey findings
Significantly more respondents in the group who had participated in a module said they found the guidelines useful.

The main reason amongst respondents who did not find the guidelines more useful after
participating in a module was the presence of local guidelines.

More respondents who had participated in a module would refer a patient to a specialist within one day of suspecting they had cancer.

GPs who had participated in the training modules were more likely to be aware of the correct recommended maximum waiting time for referral to specialist services (95 per cent versus 87 per cent).

85 per cent of respondents had not participated in any other training covering the NICE cancer guidelines.

About NICE
The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is the independent organisation responsible for providing national guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention and treatment of ill health.

NICE produces guidance in three areas of health; public health, health technologies and clinical practice.

About Doctors.net.uk
Doctors.net.uk Limited was founded in 1998 by Dr Neil Bacon, an Oxford specialist, to build an electronic network for doctors that would help improve healthcare.

Doctors.net.uk provides a secure spam and virus-protected e-mail service, accredited interactive education and a wide range of online knowledge services. It has over 128,000 UK doctors as members, including 38,000 GPs and 25,000 Hospital Consultants, and a further 18,000 medical students. Each day over 35,000 doctors use the service.

Doctors.net.uk provides highly-targeted communication campaigns for pharmaceutical and healthcare companies, the Department of Health, the General Medical Council and medical colleges, providing them with effective access to doctors for marketing, education, training and market research.

Doctors.net.uk is based near Oxford.

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