Nursing informatics is the use of information and technology to support practice, education and research. It sounds straightforward; after all, we all use information every day to plan, assess, make decisions and work out how well we did through mechanisms, such as audit and research. For some reason, however, nursing informatics seems to have developed a label of belonging to so-called “nurse geeks”, with a focus on the more technical aspects of informatics – areas such as classification systems and informatics standards.

This is missing the point. Today, where information and IT are routinely used in our lives, nurses need to understand and integrate them into routine practice, and to embrace the opportunities they provide to improve and manage care in new ways.

Patients’ and service users’ expectations are changing too. They expect us to share information appropriately, to be able to access information to support what we do, to be able to schedule appointments and give accurate times for our attendance. Some may even expect us to be able to email or Skype them.

Consumer health informatics is another “flavour” of informatics that is about how we bridge the gap between patients and health information resources, for example, giving patients access to records and information that enable them to take more responsibility for managing their own health needs. This is part of routine nursing practice and yet we do not seem to be embracing this area as routinely as will be needed in this information age; patients and service users are less passive and better informed with access to online resources.

For many new entrants into nursing, technology has always been part of their lives, and they rightly expect this to pervade the world of work. Many will be disappointed as technology in some settings is still in an early phase of development.

There will need to be many changes in how we use information, how we support patients and carers to use it, and how we develop information systems to support clinical decision making. While none of this is new, some of the skills and vision that need to be embedded in our systems mean our leaders need to have an “upgraded” leadership view.

All of this change is a leadership challenge; it requires leaders who are able to see a vision that includes information and technology as key parts of the future, leaders who can reframe the challenges facing healthcare in ways that allow the professions to see how technology can be an enabler in the system, rather than something to be avoided or feared.

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