Five common myths about Open APIs

EMIS Group's Dr Shaun O'Hanlon gives some practical advice on interoperability through Open APIs.

It's not the most elegant acronym in the world, but Open APIs is a key term in the standard CCIO vocabulary - reflecting the rising importance of interoperability and open standards in healthcare informatics.

Achieving joined-up healthcare is a vital objective for the NHS - never more so than at this time of intense financial pressure and radical change recently articulated in the far-reaching 'sustainability and transformation plans' (STPs).

Despite the central importance of interoperability to healthcare strategy, there remains a good deal of confusion around what exactly we mean by Open APIs, and how these can be used to deliver a revolution in healthcare information. Instead, we use it as a throwaway term in interoperability discussions; "that'll all be easier with Open APIs" and "all we need is the suppliers to provide Open APIs".

Here, Dr Shaun O'Hanlon, Chief Medical Officer at EMIS Group, identifies five common myths and signposts useful sources of further information.

1. Open APIs mean anyone with an innovative new product idea can connect to an existing system

The Department of Health's commitment to Open APIs as a central plank of its technology strategy is a game-changer. It's a significant policy change designed to actively encourage innovation in every quarter. In the Open API era, everyone from start-ups to established, leading suppliers and NHS technical service teams can design 'write once, use many' solutions using easy to understand data schema. Shared standards mean clever ideas can be implemented more quickly and easily – delivering quicker benefits for NHS efficiency and patient care. But it's not quite as simple as declaring 'open house' for healthcare innovation. Step one is developing the innovative solution. Step two is implementing it, and this requires careful work to ensure security and clinical safety. However great the potential of an idea, this second phase can't be rushed – the consequences for patient care of an improperly tested solution could be catastrophic.

2. Open APIs are an NHS-led initiative and nothing to do with suppliers

Against a backcloth of many centralised NHS technology initiatives, it's easy to understand how this view might prevail. In some quarters, there is perhaps still an expectation that the lead role in this new era should be taken by the Department of Health. In fact, success will only come if there is true collaboration across the board. That means NHS teams, existing and new suppliers, trusts and CCGs sharing the baton, working together to understand how open standards can enable new ideas. No-one said it was going to be easy – creating open standards requires communication, pragmatism and sequencing to focus on the key issues rather than get bogged down in so much detail that new ideas never get off the ground. Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration – that's the name of the game.

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3. Open standards are a nice to have but not essential

The NHS has been so clear about the importance of open standards that it's hard to believe there are still naysayers, although I think it's fair to say there are varying degrees of enthusiasm in different quarters. Adopting open standards certainly presents a challenge to established suppliers, and for CCIOs it can feel like another layer of complexity in an already complicated landscape. But there can be no doubt that open standards are here to stay. In his recently published landmark review of NHS IT, Professor Bob Wachter said that national standards for interoperability should not only be developed but also enforced, with 'an expectation of widespread interoperability of core data elements by 2020'. Closed systems will not be able to support the delivery of the radical new services envisaged by the STPs, with their focus on place-based not institution-based healthcare. It will also be important for suppliers and NHS customers to continually update open standards in order to meet the new challenges of the future.

4. Procuring an open standards approach is complex

The complexity and granularity of the information technology needs of a service as comprehensive as the NHS is mind-boggling. From the customer's standpoint, it's tempting to feel therefore that adding open standards into this already complex mix will be difficult. While no-one said it was going to be easy, I'd like to offer some reassurance. I said earlier that collaboration is the key to success, and the good news is that there is a committed and enthusiastic body of people and organisations already working together to make open standards a success. There isn't room to signpost them all here, but good starting points would be the INTEROpen collaborative and the Interoperability Handbook published by NHS England-backed Code4Health. Suppliers like EMIS Health also have a role to play, and for our part we share opinions and advice on our website.

5. Open standards are about systems, not patients

When thinking about open standards and interoperability, it's very easy to focus purely on the technology. But it's vital we don't forget the ultimate beneficiary of joined up data – and that's the patient. Patients have been asking for joined-up healthcare for years. They are the ones who are frustrated and inconvenienced when systems don't talk to each other and information goes awry. At worst, they are the ones whose care is compromised because of this. Ultimately, everything we do in NHS IT comes back to improving the care of the patient and we must never forget that. It's encouraging to note that as part of the commitment to open standards, innovative new patient apps are now starting to come to market – for example, the first to be approved for integration with primary GP systems through the GPSoc contract framework.

http://www.digitalhealth.net/integration/47969/ipatient-emis-integration-complete

Where can I find out more?

Useful sources of information and support include:
www.interopen.org
https://www.england.nhs.uk/digitaltechnology/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2015/09/
interoperabilty-handbk.pdf
https://www.emishealth.com/thinking/

And of course, Digital Health provides daily news and updates as well as more in-depth insight.

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