14
Knowledge Management and the National Health Service in Scotland

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14.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to consider the National Health Service (NHS) in Scotland (NHSiS) from a knowledge management (KM) perspective and describe some of the issues, advances, and successes. It begins with some background information on the NHSiS. There follows a discussion on the advances made in terms of developing the NHSiS as a knowledge-based organization, based on some models from the KM literature. Finally, there is a case study: the National Pathways Project, giving an example of KM in practice.

14.2 Background

The NHSiS was established in July 1948 as a result of the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1947. Since that time there have been some organizational changes; but, in general, the NHSiS has consisted of "operational units," some form of management system, and governance arrangements through a board structure.

Currently, the NHSiS can be described as comprising the following:

- front-line staff
- service units
- organizational units
- local NHS boards
- NHS national organizations.

The government department managing the NHSiS is the Scottish Executive Health Department (SEHD), which includes within it the Centre for Change and Innovation (CCI).

Although this is the basic, traditional structure, there are an increasing number of strategic and operational configurations that cross the traditional boundaries of organization and sector, e.g. community health partnerships, managed clinical networks, regional planning partnerships. The cross-boundary nature of these models has major implications for KM.
14.2.1 Frontline Staff

Doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, and other healthcare professionals deliver healthcare activity to their patients or clients. Such activity may consist of assessment (through interview, physical testing, or more technical tests) and intervention (carrying out procedures or prescribing medication or some other device or treatment). The healthcare professions tend to have their own professional bodies, such as the various Royal Colleges, which are involved in teaching, education, and maintaining standards of practice by their members.

14.2.2 Service Units

The organization of front-line staff usually forms a relatively small unit to start with, e.g. the hospital ward, outpatient departments, or the general practice (which is, in fact, contracted to the NHS rather than being a part of the organization). There may be organization of these units into larger departments.

14.2.3 Organizational Units

The next major level of organization is that around which most planning can be carried out. Hospitals may be organized into acute operating divisions; primary care is currently organized around community health partnerships (which are strategic bodies working across sectoral boundaries, and includes organizations other than those within the NHS, such as local authorities and voluntary organizations).

14.2.4 Local National Health Service Boards

The next level of organization is the local NHS board. This covers a defined geographic area, and encompasses all operating divisions within what is known as a single system. They have a degree of autonomy and a decision-making system based on a board consisting of executive and nonexecutive members. Since the move to "single system working," NHS boards form the single employing organization for the NHSiS at the local level.

14.2.5 National Health Service National Organizations

There are other NHS boards which have a remit across Scotland. These boards have a range of functions.

National Services Scotland. This covers a number of national roles, such as a central legal function, communicable diseases and environmental health, managing data from the NHSiS on a national basis, national screening programs, blood transfusion services, some other national services, and administrative functions.