Introduction

This chapter looks at a wide range of aspects of the deployment and application of information technology (IT) across the health domain. It considers the role of specialist informatics and IT professionals, the health informatics skills and competencies required by other clinical and health and management personnel, and the emerging involvement of citizens in this area. It concentrates on the human resource issues relating to eHealth and, more broadly, health informatics. The workforce is a crucial element in the equation of producing effective information support to clinical specialists and health managers operationally, in education and research, and in both strategic and tactical planning. The health informatics workforce spans fields such as public and private care delivery, policy and planning, product and service provision and academia. Over time, informatics professionals have had to face different challenges, many of which are considered in this chapter. Much of the basis for the text in this chapter is the work and experiences of the United Kingdom (UK) Council for Health Informatics Professions (UKCHIP, www.ukchip.org) which is the regulatory body for health informaticians working in and for health services across the UK. Other countries are adopting and adapting the standards of generic and specialised informatics and professionalism used by UKCHIP. Many examples of eHealth in this chapter are drawn from the UK situation; comparisons with activities in other countries are also made although not exhaustively.

Defining the health informatics professional brand

It is becoming increasingly necessary to define health informatics\(^1\) as a brand and as a profession. A first point to note is the importance of using the term
“health informatics professional” rather than making a delineation between a health informatics practitioner and a health professional. The importance of this distinction lies in recognising that practitioners and professionals are selected from the same job role roster, albeit at differing levels.

The key criteria of professionals, set out by Lord Benson (House of Lords, 1992), is that they meet standards of competence, professional behaviour and ethical rules and work for the benefit of the public. Given that all healthcare practice now requires information and a capability to analyse and reference that information, health informatics professionals, including eHealth practitioners, stand “at the shoulder” of all clinicians and managers. Like those clinical and managerial individuals, health informatics practitioners must act in a professional manner and be recognised as professionals. The concept of the health informatics professional is however still developing, as noted by Hersh (Hersh, 2010) in his work reviewing the health information technology workforce, in which he argued for “more research to better characterise the workforce of those who develop, implement and evaluate HIT systems [which will] better inform the development of optimal competencies and curricula for their most effective training and education”.

Characteristics of the health informatics workforce

Health informatics professionals operate in a wide variety of contexts, and face numerous challenges locally, nationally and globally.

Many countries worldwide are recognised members of the global organisation, the International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA, www.imia.org), but the situation regarding workforce recognition and profiling in a large number of countries is not clear. However, both the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) demonstrate a formal interest in several workforce issues including workforce flexibility, recognition and mobility through formal communications, such as the EU–US transatlantic eHealth/Health IT Roadmap (USHHS-EC (2013)) and the EU–US Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation surrounding health-related Information Communication and Technologies (USHHS-EC (2010)).

National and EU-level policy commitments address a wide number of individuals, including health informatics specialists, clinicians, health managers and other end-users who require selective skills in health informatics to carry out their daily work. They include “Strategies for development of a skilled health IT workforce and of eH/HI proficiencies in the health professional workforce such that clinicians can fully utilise the technology’s potential to enhance their professional experience and performance” (USHHS-EC (2010)). Yet the health informatics community “salami” is sliced in different ways by different bodies. There is variety in the diverse categorisations of careers and skills