Getting the best out of your software

General practice clinical systems in the UK are some of the best in the world. However, they are also very complex, and people don’t always get the best from them. This wastes time and creates stress and distractions.

The idea
The computer is the most-used instrument in most consulting rooms. It is also a major source of frustration reported by clinicians, and has been shown in research to create distractions to safe and effective consulting. Some of this has been found to be caused by the physical location of computer screens on the desk. Another key factor is the clinician’s confidence in navigating the clinical record and their knowledge of the differing ways to perform functions in the software.

Clinicians who observe one another using the computer frequently report discovering new and quicker ways to find information or get things done. Tasks can often be accomplished a number of different ways, and the complexities of the computer systems means that some functions can be accessed and used in more than one way, too. Spreading this knowledge and building confidence allows consultations to be quicker and frees clinicians’ minds to concentrate on more important things.

Tips
- Include introductory sessions on how to use the system and your practice’s templates and customisations for all new staff, including locums. Have a repeat session after the first two or three weeks, as an aide memoire and to go beyond the basics.
- Create opportunities to watch colleagues using the computer, to see what you – or they - could learn. For example, in clinical team meetings, take in turns to be the person using the computer.
- Use audits or QOF work as an opportunity for everyone to suggest ways of doing the work in the most efficient way.
- Periodically, have an item in a team meeting where anyone can share a task they find difficult or frustrating to perform on the computer, and invite colleagues to share tips.
- Ask new staff or learners in the practice what tips they have picked up from other people or places they have worked.
- If a lot of people are finding a particular task or function is causing frustration, consider contacting the software supplier. They may be able to advise on an alternative approach, provide training or note it for later improvement.