BBC News 29 March 2006

NHS contract delays hit Accenture

Management consulting group Accenture has reported a 67% profits drop after accounting for expected losses from building a new NHS computer system.

Second-quarter net income fell to $69.7m (£40.1m) from $209.8m a year earlier, the US company said.

It partly blamed delays by its UK partner in the NHS project, iSoft, in delivering vital computer programmes.

Accenture now fears that the system will not be used by the NHS as widely as had previously been forecast.

Accenture admitted underestimating the scale of the problem

The $3.5bn contract with the NHS was for Accenture to help design, build and manage information systems to support patient care through electronic medical records, appointment booking and prescription systems.

'Unacceptable'

In the light of the delays, the UK government had now decided to let doctors use alternative computer systems, said Accenture Chief Financial Officer Mike McGrath.

Despite telling shareholders in July last year that the company had resolved its problems with the contract, it has now warned that the problems had been underestimated.

"I am taking personal responsibility for getting the NHS issue behind us," said chief executive Bill Green. "These results are unacceptable."

However, Accenture said it would try to renegotiate the terms of the deal in a bid to stem its losses.

BBC news 10 April 2006

Call for review of NHS IT upgrade
The £6.2bn upgrade of the NHS IT system needs to be independently investigated, leading computer scientists say.

The group of academics have written to MPs questioning whether the plans are robust enough to meet the demands of the NHS, Computer Weekly magazine said.

But the government said the programme was under "constant review" and was "resilient".

The 10-year IT programme is aimed at linking more than 30,000

GPs in England to nearly 300 hospitals by 2012.

It involves an online booking system, a centralised medical records system for 50m patients, e-prescriptions and fast computer network links between NHS organisations.

The senior academics question whether the National Programme for IT has been properly designed and rigorously reviewed to meet the needs of 24-hour health care.

The new system will link 50 million patients' records

66 Reliable sources within NPfIT have raised concerns about the technology itself 99

Letter from computer scientists

They pointed out the nature of the NHS means it would have to support huge volumes of data and traffic.

They also raise questions about patient confidentiality - health professionals across the country will be given access to electronic care records.

GPs have already gone on record warning the system might not have enough safeguards in place.

The letter said: "Concrete, objective information about NPfIT's progress is not available to external observers.

"Reliable sources within NPfIT have raised concerns about the technology itself.

Concerns

"We propose that the Health Select Committee help resolve uncertainty about NPfIT by asking the government to commission an independent technical assessment with all possible speed."

Cambridge University expert Professor Ross Anderson, one of more than 20 signatories of the letter, said it crystallised the "growing concerns felt by many people".

The warnings come after the IT upgrade has been dogged by controversy.

Reports have suggested Oxford's Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre experienced major difficulties when it introduced the patient records system with some patients being "lost in the system".

And GPs in Nottinghamshire have complained that the choose and book system which allows online appointment booking is not secure enough. The system is already a year behind schedule.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health said: "The National Programme for IT is under constant review, scrutiny and audit by parliament and government bodies.

"It is a robust and resilient programme of health care IT delivery in the NHS.

"We remain confident that the technical architecture of the national programme is appropriate and will enable benefits to be delivered for patients, while ensuring value for money to the taxpayer."

BBC News 30 May 2006

GPs dissatisfied with IT system
Doctors have called for a review into the £6.2bn NHS computer project, according to a survey by BBC News.

The IT upgrade aims to link up 30,000 GPs to nearly 300 hospitals in a radical overhaul of the NHS IT network.

Half of the GPs said the "choose and book" online booking system was poor or fairly poor. The poll was completed by 447 hospital doctors and 340 GPs.

And in a further blow, ministers said other parts of the project

were behind schedule, pushing it over budget.

The Financial Times reported that the government had admitted the electronic records system - a database which could be accessed by health professionals anywhere in the country - was more than two years behind schedule.

Instead, the NHS has been promoting the choose and book system, which it said has helped make 400,000 appointments to date.

But in the survey, by BBC Radio 4's File on Four, doctors remained less convinced. Four out of five GPs had access to the computer system, but half said they rarely or never use it.

Only about one in five said it was good or fairly good.

The overwhelming majority - 85% - say there should be an independent review of the entire scheme by technical experts to check its basic viability.

As well as choose and book, the upgrade also involves a centralised medical records system for 50m patients, e-prescriptions and fast computer network links between NHS organisations.

Asked if the cost of the upgrade was a good use of NHS resources, almost two-thirds of GPs and hospital doctors said no.

Half the GPs surveyed did not use the computer booking system

KEY PARTS OF NHS IT UPGRADE
Choose and book - A system to allow patients to book hospital appointments at a place, date and time of their convenience from GP surgeries. Nearly 10m such referrals are made each year
NHS care records service - An electronic database of patient medical records which will allow NHS staff across the country to access information wherever someone is treated
Electronic prescriptions - More than 325m prescriptions are made each year. By 2007 the paper based system will be replaced with an electronic version, which will allow patients to pick up repeat prescriptions from any pharmacy in the country

'Risks'

Oxford University IT expert Professor Martyn Thomas said: "It may very well be that the programme is actually under control and they are aware of all the risks and that in due course systems will be delivered which will prove to be absolutely ideal for all the people who will need to use them.

"All I can say is it doesn't look like that at the moment."

But Dr Simon Eccles, from Connecting for Health, the organisation overseeing the IT project, said: "We have no difficulty with an independent assessment. We would welcome such a move.

"Our view is that we are already under enormous scrutiny, political financial and otherwise. We would be happy with further scrutiny, providing we don't delay the project further while answering yet more questions to explain why the project is delayed."

The poll results come as the government admitted the electronic records system could be two-and-a-half years late and cost billions of pounds more to implement.

Health Minister Lord Warner said the government had had to "regroup" over the electronic care record for all 50m NHS patients in England, which is meant to make patients' data available wherever and whenever it is needed.

The delays mean the electronic record may not be in place until early 2008 and are due partly to delays in providing the software, which is being developed by iSoft and other companies.

And Dr Hamish Meldrum, chairman of the British Medical Association's GPs committee, said there were concerns over patient confidentiality that needed to be addressed before the scheme was rolled out.

And on choose and book, Dr Meldrum added: "While the concept of being able to book their hospital appointments whilst in the GPs surgery is superficially attractive, there are a whole host of technical and practical problems that have to be addressed.

"So far, experience has been very patchy in terms of how well or badly the electronic booking system works."

And Richard Bacon, a member of the Public Accounts Committee, said the entire project had been plagued by a "whole load of problems", while choose and book was "little short of a disaster".

BBC news 15 June 2006

Q&A: NHS IT upgrade

The NHS IT upgrade is in the spotlight again.

The National Audit Office has produced a report criticising parts of the project.

It is the latest in a long line of controversies surrounding the 10-year programme.

What is happening?

The new system is connecting GPs and hospitals

The programme is being run by a government agency called NHS Connecting for Health.

By 2014, 30,000 GPs in England will be linked up to nearly 300 hospitals giving the NHS a "21st century" computer network.

It involves an online booking system, Choose and Book, a centralised medical records system for 50m patients, e-prescriptions and fast computer network links between NHS organisations.

It is said to be the most ambitious computer project in the world and represents the largest single investment in IT in the UK.

Why is it being done?

Most agree the NHS has never spent enough on IT, so it is understandable the system is being upgraded.

But it also has to be seen in the context of government reforms. From the beginning of this year, patients have been able to choose from different hospitals for non-emergency operations.

This is expected to be expanded out to other parts of health care in forthcoming years.

To make this achievable, it is clear a fully integrated IT system is a necessity.

How much is it costing?

The system is set to cost £6.8bn extra over 10 years.

In addition, when the training and local implementation is taken into account, the figure rises to over £12bn.

The government has also said if you include spending on the current IT systems while the new network is introduced the figure will rise to about £20bn.

Why has it been controversial?

Despite the government's enthusiasm, the system has not proved popular with doctors and IT professionals.

Doctors have consistently complained they were not fully consulted about the system.

They have also expressed concerns about patient confidentiality as the electronic records system allows health professionals anywhere in the country to access highly sensitive data.

Leading IT experts wrote to MPs in April questioning whether the programme had been properly designed to meet the needs of 24-hour health care.

They pointed out the nature of the NHS means it would have to support huge volumes of data and traffic.

Key parts of it are also falling behind schedule. The Choose and Book system is now not due to be fully implemented until next year - 12 months after planned.

Meanwhile, the electronic records system is delayed by more than two years.

Why have things gone wrong?

Any IT project to link up the NHS all up was always going to face tough challenges and high cost.

Tony Collins, of Computer Weekly magazine said the job of introducing an NHS-wide IT system was simply bigger than the government expected.

"The NHS comprises hundreds of businesses, and it was more complicated, more time-consuming and more expensive than they thought."

What is the National Audit Office saying?

The watchdog has warned that the project faces significant challenges if it is going to be successfully implemented.

Key parts of the project, such as the online booking system, Choose and Book, and the electronic care records, are behind schedule.

The report is also critical about the lack of engagement with clinicians.

But the watchdog said the costs of delays will not be passed on to tax payers as the contracts agreed with suppliers have tight restrictions in place putting the onus on them to deliver on time or pay the price.

The NAO also found the project was running more or less to budget - although the cost of the contracts had increased slightly from £6.2bn to £6.8bn because different aspects have been added.

However, the report added it was too early to tell if they project represented value for money.

Major NHS IT upgrade hit by delay
Key parts of the £6.8bn NHS IT upgrade in England are falling behind schedule, a funding watchdog says.

The National Audit Office said it was too early to tell if it gave value for money, but significant challenges remained if it was to be completed.

The watchdog said the online booking system and electronic care records were delayed and there had been a lack of engagement with clinicians.

GPs have concerns about some parts of the new system

Ministers said there were problems, but added the 10-year plan was on track.

The programme, run by a government agency called NHS Connecting for Health, is aimed at linking more than 30,000 GPs to nearly 300 hospitals by 2014.

The new systems include an online booking system, a centralised medical records system for 50m patients, e-prescriptions and fast computer network links between NHS organisations.

The NAO said that the total IT bill was set to be £12.4bn.

This includes the original £6.2bn cost of contract, which has now risen to £6.8bn due to the scope of the programme extending, and various other costs incurred from training people and paying for NHS trusts to implement the new systems.

❝ I would stake my reputation that in the long term, this project will pay for itself. ❞

Lord Warner
Health minister
READ THE REPORT

[National Audit Office report on NHS IT programme [787KB]](#)

The widely reported £20bn figure includes spending on the existing IT network while the new system is put in place.

Concerns

The online booking system, Choose and Book, is already a year behind schedule, while the electronic records system has been delayed by more than two years.

The NAO report said that, while the costs of delays were being borne by private sector companies contracted to provide services, their impact could dent confidence in the programme.

KEY PARTS OF NHS IT UPGRADE
Choose and book - A system to allow patients to book hospital appointments at a place, date and time of their convenience from GP surgeries. Nearly 10m such referrals are made each year
NHS care records service -

It also said NHS staff did not feel involved in the implementation of the programme - with three out of 10 unaware it was happening.

Richard Vautrey, the IT lead on the British Medical Association's GPs committee, said the introduction of the system was "stuttering".

He added: "We still have serious concerns about patient confidentiality.

"But it is just one of many problems. IT systems on this scale are always going to run into problems.

"The problem is that politicians have raised the public's expectations by insisting on an unrealistic timetable."

An electronic database of patient medical records which will allow NHS staff across the country to access information wherever someone is treated **Electronic prescriptions** - More than 325m prescriptions are made each year. By 2007 the paper based system will be replaced with an electronic version, which will allow patients to pick up repeat prescriptions from any pharmacy in the country

Q&A: NHS IT upgrade

'Getting to grips'

Edward Leigh MP, chairman of the Commons Public Accounts committee said: "Many staff, including GPs, are alarmed and dispirited by having the new systems imposed by diktat from above.

"They are also often confused about what the new systems are going to do and when. At the moment the jury is out."

Nigel Edwards, policy director of the NHS Confederation, told BBC News the project was in fact "largely on budget".

"This impression of an absolutely eye-wateringly large overspend is probably slightly incorrect.

"There's a degree of anxiety because, while the procurement was done really rather well, not enough attention was paid initially to really involving frontline clinical staff in finding out what they wanted and bringing them along with the programme."

Health Minister Lord Warner said: "The project has made significant progress, but there are some areas where we could make further progress.

"In hindsight, there was more we could have done in consultation [with clinicians].

"But I would stake my reputation that in the long term, this project will pay for itself."

Shadow Minister for Health Stephen O'Brien said the report shed light on the delayed and "ill-planned" NHS IT programme which the government had "constantly tried to shield from public scrutiny".

BBC news 1pm, 1 August 2006:

Services back after NHS IT crash

Computer services are being restored to 80 NHS trusts in the North West of England and West Midlands following a massive IT failure on Sunday.

The crash meant staff could not check patients' appointments or access details of admissions and transfers.

About 40% of affected trusts are believed to have had service restored.

NHS Connecting for Health, which runs the health service's IT programme said services should be fully restored on Thursday morning.

No patient data was lost because of the computer failure

Eight major hospitals and more than 70 primary care trusts in north-west England and the West Midlands were hit.

The failure means staff have to log patient movements manually, but no clinical information has been affected.

A spokesman for University Hospital, Birmingham, said it hoped to have its system back up by Tuesday afternoon.

Round the clock

The problem affects trusts in Birmingham and the Black Country, Cheshire and Merseyside, Cumbria and Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Shropshire and Staffordshire and the southern part of the West Midlands.

Computer company CSC, which runs the system, said experts were working around the clock to resolve the situation.

A spokesman for NHS Connecting for Health, which oversees the multi-billion pound NHS IT service, said that no data had been lost, and that the incident was caused by "storage area network equipment failure".

> **The NHS cannot rely on a computer system that is only right most of the time**
>
> Steve Webb, Liberal Democrat health spokesman

The NHS Programme for IT aims to link more than 30,000 GPs to nearly 300 hospitals by 2014.

It is set to include an online booking system, a centralised medical records system for 50 million patients, e-prescriptions and fast computer network links between NHS bodies.

'Alarming'

A spokeswoman from the Department of Health said: "It is regrettable that the issue in the North West and West Midlands is causing inconvenience to patients.

"However, the affected NHS trusts have back-up systems to ensure they can continue with their day-to-day business.

"NHS Connecting for Health is working quickly with the supplier of the computer system to resolve this issue as quickly as possible."

Shadow health minister Stephen O'Brien said: "Despite the huge amounts of taxpayers' money which has been sprayed at the NHS IT system, it continues to be left wanting."

Liberal Democrat health spokesman Steve Webb said: "It is very alarming that trusts are reporting practical problems with a multi-billion pound IT system.

"The NHS cannot rely on a computer system that is only right most of the time."

'No believable plan' for completion of iSoft work on NHS overhaul

· Review flags up 13 'red' areas of acute concern
· Software firm insists parts of system are being set up

Simon Bowers
Monday August 21, 2006
The Guardian

One of the most important pieces of software in the NHS's £6.2bn IT overhaul - which is being developed by iSoft - may miss its already delayed release dates, according to a review by the two consultancies responsible for delivering the systems.

In iSoft's annual report last year, the troubled developer said the programme, known as Lorenzo, was already "on the market" and had been "available" from early 2004.

The NHS IT project has run into severe delays. Photograph: Getty

In January this year, however, it issued a profits warning saying the NHS's National Programme for IT "had been experiencing a significant degree of rescheduling ... as a result, it is now clear that delivery of iSoft application solutions to NHS trusts will occur, in general, later than previously expected". No revised delivery date was given, and the company did not mention progress on Lorenzo.

A month after the profits warning, Accenture and Computer Services Corporation (CSC), iSoft's partners on three NHS contracts covering 60% of Britain, produced their own review of Lorenzo's "deliverability and fitness for purpose".

The review, seen by the Guardian, is highly critical of the Lorenzo software development and iSoft's expectations of a likely release date. Beyond a basic version of Lorenzo, which has been tailored for GPs, the review found "there is no well defined scope and therefore no believable plan for releases".

Last night a spokesman for iSoft said: "The Lorenzo solution is broad and far-reaching, and elements are in the process of being implemented ... we will be providing an update in our full-year results."

ISoft had sent the review's authors a series of release dates for different versions of Lorenzo and said the final, fully functional version would not be available until the second quarter of 2008.

"These releases must be viewed as 'indicative' at best and are likely to be highly optimistic," the report concluded. No Lorenzo system has been installed in the UK, and iSoft has been working on an interim version, which largely involves a repackaging of older software.

Last year, iSoft's then chief executive, Tim Whiston, told shareholders that "Lorenzo has achieved significant acclaim from healthcare providers, analysts and the leading technology organisations".

The Accenture and CSC review took a different view from that of Mr Whiston, who quit iSoft two months ago. It labelled 13 out of 39 matters relating to Lorenzo "red", meaning they raised issues requiring immediate work.

Among the areas of acute concern was about iSoft's ability to plan and estimate how long the development process would take and its confusing "progress management". Even "clinical safety" was labelled red by the reviewers.

Most seriously, however, the Lorenzo review found "no evidence for the development, nor testing of, technical procedures that would be required for operation and maintenance of the live system ... this is the main risk to the successful delivery of a fit-for-purpose solution."

This month, iSoft confirmed its auditor, Deloitte, had found accounting irregularities for the 2004 and 2005 financial years. Steve Graham, one of the group's founders, was suspended as commercial director and iSoft said "other employees", who had since left the company, may also have been involved. A "more formal" investigation has been started.

The Guardian recently reported that Connecting for Health, the NHS IT procurement department, had made an up-front payment to iSoft in 2005, days before the company's year-end. ISoft confirmed at least some of this payment was booked in the accounts for that year.

Following irregular accounting revelations, iSoft has delayed its 2006 results and adopted a far more conservative accounting policy. Its figures must be filed by Thursday and are expected to be accompanied by news of Lorenzo's progress.

Connecting for Health expects Lorenzo to be deployed by 60% of Britain's GPs and hospitals. It is believed to be one of the largest IT projects in the world, with Lorenzo alone to be used by about 600,000 clinicians and managers looking after up to 30 million patients.

Last month, basic administrative computer systems at about 90 NHS trusts, including at least eight acute trusts, failed for about four days. They included iSoft software provided predominantly by CSC. Connecting for Health said the disruption followed a power cut at a CSC central data centre, adding that a standby disaster recovery unit had failed to provide a back-up.

NHS computer system breaks down 110 times in four months

John Carvel, social affairs editor
Tuesday September 19, 2006
The Guardian

The government's £12.4bn programme to upgrade IT systems in the NHS experienced more than 110 technical breakdowns during the past four months, it emerged last night.

The problems, affecting dozens of hospitals across England, were serious enough to be logged by NHS managers as "major incidents", according to a report in Computer Weekly magazine. Some involved programs that allow doctors to view x-rays; others affected the online appointments registers that hold details of patient bookings and planned treatments.

About 20 of the breakdowns caused simultaneous problems across several NHS sites. The most serious, triggered by a fire in a national data centre at Maidstone in Kent in July, led to systems at 80 hospitals and primary care trusts collapsing for up to four days.

The disclosure prompted opposition calls for the government to slim down its Connecting for Health project and return control over IT purchasing to hospital chief executives.

But a spokesman for Connecting for Health said the figures were misleading because hospitals were entitled to describe a breakdown as a "major incident" even if it caused a brief delay.

The Connecting for Health programme, the world's biggest civilian IT project, aims to link more than 30,000 GPs to nearly 300 hospitals by 2014. It includes an online booking system, centralised medical records for 50 million patients and communications for electronic prescriptions. The booking system, Choose and Book, is a year behind schedule and the electronic records system is at least two years behind.

Richard Bacon, a Conservative member of the Commons public accounts committee, said: "This is the latest evidence that there are serious and growing problems with the whole national programme for IT in the health service. In some cases, NHS staff and clinicians have lost access to their main hospital systems.

"It is now time the government reconsidered its approach. It would be more sensible to slim down the programme and to give control of purchasing to hospital chief executives locally, subject to common standards. The tragedy is that if the NHS continues on its present course, a huge amount of money will be spent and much of it will be wasted."

Connecting for Health said: "Any interruption to service is unfortunate, but trusts have tried-and-trusted manual systems to provide continuity of care.

"We prefer NHS trusts to err on the side of caution and report more rather than less. Service availability is typically much higher than for systems procured before the national programme ... What is being quoted represents a very small service interruption and we expect performance to compare favourably with any large-scale organisation that uses IT - especially in the first year of operations."