

NHS DIRECT INERACTIVE: THE UK NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE ON DIGITAL INTERACTIVE TELEVISION

Bob Gann

In December 2004, the Rt Hon John Reid, the then Secretary of State for Health launched NHS Direct Interactive, a new health information service on digital satellite TV. By pressing the interactive button on their TV remote control, over 7.5 million households in the UK can now access good quality health information from the comfort of their living rooms.

Digital tv in the UK

NHS Direct Interactive was designed to take advantage of the explosion on digital tv take-up in the UK. Almost 60% of homes in the UK now have access to digital tv through three major platforms: digital satellite (largely Sky), digital cable (through two companies - Telewest and NTL), and digital terrestrial (by purchasing a Freeview set top box). Recent figures indicate that there 7m UK homes have digital satellite, 2.5m digital cable, and 4m digital terrestrial. Digital terrestrial is expanding most rapidly with many people finding cheap set top boxes attractive. The UK government intends to switch off analogue television around 2010 at which point all tv will be accessed through digital platforms. In some parts of the country full switch over to digital has already been achieved.

NHS Direct: a multichannel service

For NHS Direct, digital tv provided the opportunity to reach wider sections of society than already using its other channels. NHS Direct provides 24 hour access to information on health and health services, including advice from nurses on everyday health problems. NHS Direct was launched by the new Labour government in 1998, initially as a telephone service run from a network of call centres. In 1999, a website NHS Direct Online was launched. NHS Direct Online is now the most used health information website in the UK with over 1 million individual visitors a month. A NHS Direct Self Help Guide book has also been published. The Self Help Guide is now included in telephone directories supplied by the company Thomsons Directories, and has now been delivered to 18 million homes. Digital tv take-up has been particularly strong in lower income households. Digital satellite has a lot of young male subscribers (because of football channels) while Freeview boxes are popular with older people. Neither of these groups have

been good users of NHS Direct in the past and we hope that the new TV service will reach them better.

The NHS Direct Interactive service

In 2002 and 2003 four pilots of NHS digital tv applications were run in different parts of the UK. Levels of take-up and user satisfaction were very encouraging and in 2004 the UK government decided to launch a full national service. The National Health Service worked with a technical partner (DITG, part of the YooMedia group) to develop the service through 2004 for launch in December 2004.

NHS Direct Interactive launched with over 2,500 pages of information covering around 500 health topics, making it the largest interactive digital television service in the UK. NHS Direct Interactive service provides:

- **An A-Z of health-related issues**, including conditions and treatments, from asthma and blood transfusions through to thrush and X-rays.
- **Advice on looking after yourself**, together with frequently asked questions on popular health topics such as diet, exercise, giving up smoking.
- **Health videos** covering topics such as healthy eating, diabetes, coronary heart disease, stress and testicular cancer. The service currently has the capacity to show 8 videos simultaneously but we will be increasing to 16 video slots in July
- **Tips on how to access NHS services**, such as how to register with a doctor or make a complaint
- **Hot topics** focusing on current health issues. The hot topic on Kylie Minogue's breast cancer has been particularly popular
- Information in 16 different languages, directing users to the NHS Direct telephone interpretation service.
- A **directory of local health services**, which enables you to search for your nearest doctor, pharmacist, dentist or optician.
- A feedback facility, through which users can comment about the service.

All the health information on NHS Direct Interactive is free to digital satellite television viewers, with the exception of the directory of local health services, which requires the set top box to dial-up to retrieve data for an individual's local area. This service requires a payment equivalent to the cost of a local telephone call.

Developing the service

During 2005, new content will continue to be developed for the NHS Direct Interactive service, reflecting latest health priorities, topical health issues and user feedback. Topics on healthy living are proving particularly popular and are particularly suitable for the shared experience of the tv medium. We are developing a “quiz engine” which will enable users to participate in health quizzes and personal lifestyle tools. The quiz engine can also be used for feedback questionnaires.

Following the successful launch on digital satellite, we are now aiming to roll the service out onto the other digital platforms. We are currently in negotiation with the cable companies and expect to have the service available via NTL and Telewest later in the year. Because Freeview has been so popular there is significant demand for bandwidth, with television companies competing for space. As a result Freeview bandwidth is both scarce and expensive. At the same time the service we will be able to provide on Freeview will be very limited compared to the satellite service. We are currently carrying out a cost and benefit study to determine whether a Freeview service is worthwhile.

NHS Direct Interactive costs £7m (10m euros) a year to run. We regard this as a good investment for reaching a wider population of service users and leading the way in the UK on the use of digital interactive tv for public services.