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In the NHS of the future, you may never need a doctor or nurse

Smartphone care, AI and robotics will transform the medical system, says the head of NHS England, who admits the prospect is ‘scary’



Penny Dash, the head of NHS England, says patients “don’t necessarily need” doctors and nurses as AI technologies advance MELANIE LEMAHIEU PHOTOGRAPHY/HLTHINC



Shaun Lintern, Health Editor

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The first time patients will meet their surgeon in the future is when they are on the operating table, the head of NHS England has said.

Dr Penny Dash believes advances in technology and artificial intelligence are tearing up the traditional model of providing care, which she said would be almost entirely done through smartphones and online.

At the HLTH Europe conference in Amsterdam, Dash, who trained as a doctor in the NHS before moving into public health and consultancy for McKinsey, said she could see a future where patients would not meet clinicians until much later than they do now, and possibly not at all.

Dash even suggested there could come a point where some patients “don’t necessarily need doctors and nurses”.

“If I look to the future, some of the things that are being developed and coming downstream, like fully automating a care pathway, are phenomenal,” she said.

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“That means I would put into my phone that I have got these three symptoms, software would ask me questions, would take a photo and video me lifting my leg or lifting my arm, and the first time you would see a human being would be on an operating table.

“With [AI](#), we could do that for pretty much all health conditions. We don’t necessarily need — which will frighten a lot of people — doctors and nurses. You will not want dirty, clumsy hands inside your body. It will all be robotics and non-interventional approaches.”



However, the move towards almost entirely digital care has raised concerns among charities for the elderly, which urged the NHS to ensure “no one is left behind”. The NHS is continuing to battle record waiting lists, with the latest data, from April, showing there were 7.22 million treatments waiting to be done in England. The service is in the middle of a reorganisation and facing [cuts of £580 million to its capital budget](#) — which can be used by hospitals to buy new technology — to help fund the long-awaited defence investment plan.

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Dash is spearheading [reform of the health service](#). NHS England is shedding 50 per cent of its staff and being absorbed into the Department of Health and Social Care.

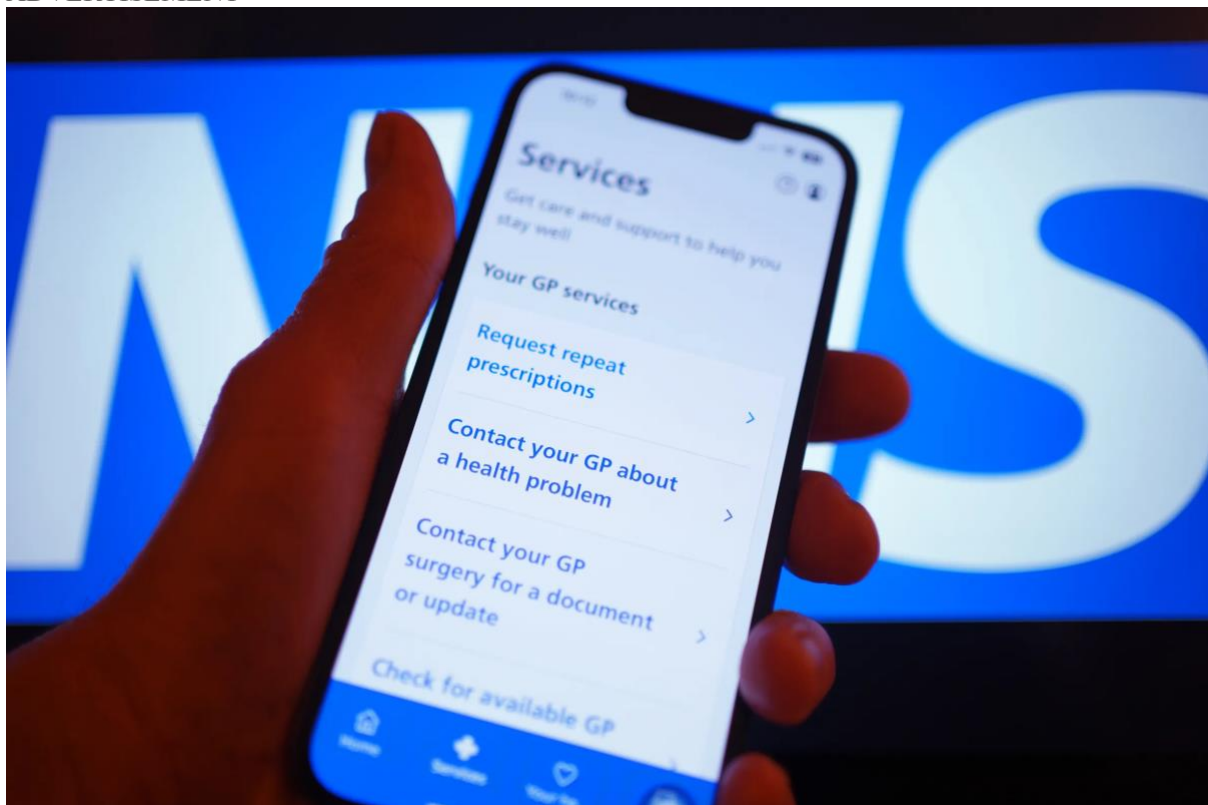
Already technology such as ambient voice technology, where AI software transcribes conversations between doctors and patients, was being widely adopted, Dash said, with “phenomenal impact”.

“If we could adopt it, even in its most constrained and limited form, we would probably free up 10 to 20 per cent of the resources we have, which we could then be reinvesting in primary prevention and secondary prevention.”

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Dash said the NHS would not rush to adopt these changes, but take it “one step at a time”, adding: “I passionately believe this would be a way better experience for people, and actually that would be the first step towards a future that might sound scary now, but the car probably sounded scary 100 years ago. So it’s about how do we make these small steps — develop a wheel, get used to a cart, and then get to a car.”

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A service called NHS Online, a fully digital specialist hospital trust, will begin next year and offer patients care through the NHS App.

Dash said this sort of approach was what patients wanted: “We know what we need to do, we’ve just got to be brave enough to do it. Many people think the politicians are the problem. It’s not the politicians, it’s us in the system.”

Caroline Abrahams, director at Age UK, said: “It’s clear that technology is set to transform many aspects of our lives for the better over the next decade, including the delivery of healthcare and how we interact with the NHS.

“The [potential of the NHS App](#) is truly exciting, but we must also ensure no one is left behind, including the many millions of older people who are not online and who often want and need to use more traditional means of communication, such as telephone and face-to-face.”

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The Royal College of Physicians has supported plans for more digital services, which could be more convenient for patients, but its president, Mumtaz Patel, said any new service must be fully linked to the current NHS system to ensure the seamless transfer of information.

Patel said: “Patients moving between virtual and physical services should never find their records [trapped in a digital silo](#). We also need to think about how we can include medical training in this model in the future — if we are to sustain the pipeline of future consultants, resident doctors must be able to learn, teach and be supervised within this new model to the same standards as in physical NHS trusts.”

She added: “We support giving patients more control and choice over their health, but it's crucial that we also maintain high standards, improve integration and carefully consider the workforce and training implications.”

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