

Prologue

In 1979 when I first started to try to use computers to improve patient care and to reduce human errors, there was a confident belief by “experts predicting the future” a) that relatively soon clever computers a) would virtually take over much of the traditional knowledge functions of doctors and b) paper would become virtually obsolete.

So strong was this belief that a cartoon even appeared in the Which magazine with a caption “The computer will see you now” Indeed the whole assumption of the film “2001” was that the computer HAL was capable of “thinking” and making “decision”s, and there were genuine predictions by experts that the power of computers would equal or even surpass that of the human brain by the year 2000.

Such predictions, as with almost all human predicitions, have come to naught. It needs to be said over and over again that a) despite talk of “neural networking” and such like concepts almost all computers currently in use are in essence nothing more than giant typewriters and calculating machines. Although sometimes decisions appear to be made by a computer, in reality all decisions are made by program writers. Such decisions may be incorporated into such programs in extremely complex ways, but computers by themselves, certainly in medicine, have yet to make any such decisions and b) that “If computers had been invented first, and paper & pen later, the latter would probably have been regarded as the world’s greatest breakthrough in the history of Information Technology”

The following discussion documents try to untangle how and why things have not turned out as was predicted; how the present situation in much of acute hospital IT has got into an inefficient mess, and what foundations are now needed to make more rational progress in future.

Rupert Fawdry. May 2008