

**RCN guidance  
Nursing staff using personal mobile phones  
for work purposes**



# Nursing staff using personal mobile phones for work purposes

## Introduction

Mobile technology, in particular the mobile phone, has made immense changes in a short space of time to the way we communicate and exchange information. However, as with the introduction of any technological innovation, new issues have been raised by mobile phone use in health and social care.

Some health and social care organisations supply mobile phones for nursing and other staff to use. In a survey of health clinicians, 73 per cent of nurses and midwives said they carry a mobile phone while at work, with approximately 80 per cent of those using their own mobile phone for work purposes (Devices4, 2010). The survey also found that the nurses and midwives who use their own mobile phones at work mostly do so to contact colleagues, but a significant number use their own mobiles for contacting patients, accessing the internet and using application software (apps). The majority of those surveyed said they do not claim back the work-related costs from their employer.

The purpose of this document is to state the RCN's position on nursing staff using their own mobile phones for work related purposes and to provide guidance on specific issues. It does not intend to be a complete guide on mobile phone usage in health and social care.

## RCN position

**The RCN does not support the use of staff personal mobile phones for routine provision of services. Staff personal mobile phones should never be used for recording, transmitting or storing patient personal or health information or images.**

### Background

“The RCN believes that IT systems are now an integral part of professional nursing practice. There is evidence to suggest that they can make a positive difference to the safety of patients; to their experience of health care and to the working lives of health professionals.” (RCN, 2010a).

This includes the safe use of mobile technology such as mobile phones, which can be used in a number of ways to improve communication between clinician and patient, and to improve safety and efficiency for nursing staff.

The modern mobile telephone has elevated the ‘phone’ far beyond telephonic communication and into the realms of entertainment, knowledge management and photography. The properties of current smartphones have made their use integral to many areas of our lives, such as entertainment, leisure, study and work, and for many people mobile technology has made it difficult to separate out these different spheres of our lives.

As mobile phone functions have evolved, so have the ways in which we use them to benefit staff and patients in health and social care, for example:

- communication via telephone, SMS text messaging and email
- photography, for example, of patients’ wounds or skin condition
- basic tools such as calculator and stopwatch
- internet/intranet usage to access guidelines and other knowledge sources
- downloadable apps designed for specific purposes
- use of global positioning system (GPS) software for getting directions or calculating mileage, and for protection purposes by tracking the location of lone working nursing staff.

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## What should nursing staff be aware of?

There are a number of issues to be taken into account if nursing staff do use their personal mobile phones for work-related purposes. RCN guidance on these issues is detailed in this document.

### 1. Employer's policy

The majority of NHS and other health and social care employers have policies relating to where and when mobile phones can be used at work. There may be restrictions on what areas of health premises mobile phones can be used in; on use of cameras and videos incorporated into mobile phones; and on personal use of mobile phones by staff while on duty. This is to: prevent interference with the functioning of certain medical equipment; to protect patient privacy and dignity; and to avoid the nuisance factor of mobile phone related noise (Department of Health, 2009). There may also be safety risks if staff use unapproved electrical equipment to charge their own phones at work.

**The RCN advises that nursing staff should adhere to their employer's policy on mobile phone use. If usage of their own mobile phones for work purposes is a regular occurrence this should be raised with their manager to explore other options, such as supplying an approved mobile phone.**

### 2. Security and confidentiality of patient information

The Nursing and Midwifery Council principles of good record keeping apply to emails, photographs, videos, tape recordings of telephone conversations, and text messages, as well as paper-based records (NMC, 2009). Therefore, information that is identifiable to a patient used in any of these media must be protected. Not all mobile phone users have a password or personal identification number (PIN) to prevent unauthorised access (Clarke and Furnell, 2005), and personal mobile phones are unlikely to have embedded encryption. Without this protection any emails, voicemails, videos, SMS text or picture messages containing patient identifiable information, could be vulnerable to unauthorised viewing if the mobile phone is lost, stolen or lent to someone else. Even if the phone is sold on the information may still be visible to the new owner.

Sharing information about patients is important for safe and effective care, but patients should be aware of how their personal information is being recorded, stored and shared, and they have the right to ask to see their record (RCN, 2010b). The patient related information or images contained in

the mobile phone's email, text or voice messaging facilities constitute part of the patient record and should be able to be attached to that relevant record, adhering to the NMC principles for good record keeping.

Explicit consent is required for photography and for sound or video recording of a patient. There is lack of clarity regarding the recognition of mobile phones and digital technology as recognised medical devices by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (BMA, 2009).

**The RCN advises that nursing staff do not use their personal mobile phones for recording, transmitting or storing patient identifiable information at any time.**

### 3. Staff safety

When telephoning or texting, the sender's number is available to the recipient. Nursing staff using their own mobile phones for this purpose could be putting themselves at risk of receiving unsolicited communications unless they are able to, and action, withholding their number.

Under health and safety law an employer has a duty to assess the risks to nursing staff working alone and to put in place measures to reduce those risks. This includes providing lone workers with a means of raising the alarm if they are in danger or need urgent assistance (HSE; NHS, 2009).

A survey of RCN members found that most used a mobile phone for security and the majority of those were their own phones (Smith, 2007). However, variation in network coverage made use of mobile phones unreliable for many users.

Since 2007 it has been illegal to use mobile phones while driving, although hands free phones can be used as long as the driver is in proper control of the vehicle (Directgov).

**The RCN advises nursing staff to withhold their number if they have to contact patients using their own mobile phone and should not give their personal numbers to patients, their carers, or their families. Patients should be discouraged from contacting staff on their own mobile phones. Appropriate work contact details should be provided instead.**

**Nursing staff should ensure that they are aware of their employer's lone working policy and, if assessed to be at risk of verbal or physical abuse, that they have been issued with the appropriate**

**technology (which may or may not be incorporated in a mobile phone,) rather than relying on their own mobile phone.**

**Nursing staff should adhere to the Highway Code regarding mobile phone use while driving a vehicle.**

#### **4. Cost and network availability**

The cost of mobile phone contracts or pay as you go deals can vary enormously and, with some contracts, functions such as picture messaging or mobile internet access cost extra. Therefore nursing staff may end up paying substantially more than they had anticipated as a result of work-related mobile phone usage. Employers may refuse to reimburse costs if they have not been agreed beforehand.

Network availability also varies and nursing staff working in a different area from their home may encounter inconsistent signal coverage.

**The RCN does not agree that nursing staff should bear the brunt of costs associated with work-related mobile phone usage. Nursing staff who do not qualify for an employer supplied mobile phone should ascertain the local policy on claiming for work-related calls made on their own mobile phones.**

#### **5. Infection control**

Studies have found high bacterial contamination, including MRSA, on mobile phones, which are likely to have originated from hand contamination. Only 12 per cent of health care workers were found to disinfect their mobile phones (Ulger et al, 2009; Srikanth et al, 2010).

**The RCN advises use of standard precautions to underpin safe care of all patients at all times when staff are using equipment such as mobile phones and computer keyboards/tablets. Precautions include hand washing before direct contact with patients and after any activity that contaminates the hands, and regular cleaning of the equipment with detergent and disinfectant wipes, which should be used in line with manufacturer's instructions (RCN, 2011a).**

#### **6. Trustworthiness of software**

There is anecdotal evidence of the use of smartphone apps in health and social care. For example, nursing students using drug calculation and medical dictionary apps on placements (Tremayne, 2008). As with any knowledge source nursing staff need to be aware of the variation in quality of information that can occur with commercially available downloadable software.

There is also a risk with smartphones of downloading viruses or worms, which can embed within data transmissions and infect other systems.

**The RCN recognises that there are many reliable and trustworthy sources of downloadable applications that can enhance knowledge and contribute to safe patient care. Nursing staff are advised to develop the knowledge and skills to: 'judge whether the information is reliable, valid, accurate, authoritative, timely, or has a particular point of view and how it is biased' (RCN, 2011b).**

**Nursing staff are advised to ensure that they have up to date antivirus software installed on their mobile phones, do not open documents, texts and emails from unknown sources and do not transfer known infected materials to work computers.**

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