Online access to detailed medical records

In addition to the current system of being able to view your medication, allergies and immunisations, there is now the facility for you to view more detailed aspects of your computerised medical records online, which we can make available to you on request. There are some issues however that we would want you to be aware of before activating this.

The first general issue is of confidentiality. The record that will become available online would include historical items that you might not anticipate being there. In some cases this could include sensitive issues such as past terminations of pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, attempted overdoses, or actual or suspected child abuse. Your information will now be on the world wide web, protected just by a username and password, and you need to consider how comfortable you feel about that. Additionally your username and password may be stored on your computer, so anyone with access to that is a couple of clicks away from your medical history. We don't have the facility to exclude some bits of information and include others, so it is currently an all or none option.

The next issue relates to the data that you will see. This facility is in its infancy, so we have yet to see how coherent the information is that you will see. The information will be all 'coded data', i.e. those items of data that we attach specific codes to so that they can be searched for and analysed, e.g. blood pressure readings. Much of the content of your record is not specifically coded, so it is possible that what you see following a consultation may not bear much resemblance to the bulk of what was discussed.

A further issue relates to test results. Blood, urine and x-ray results will be visible, which will be useful for some. However the result will be flagged as to whether or not it is within the laboratory range, and reported as abnormal if not in range. When we view your results we annotate them to indicate whether any out of range results are of significance or need further action – many technically out of range results are effectively normal. It is unclear how much of our annotations of your results will be visible to you online, so you may see quite a few 'abnormal' results reported but won't be able to tell whether they are of any real significance. How much detail of x-ray or scan reports will carry through is not currently clear, and we will need to trial the system to find out.

Finally access to documents such as clinic letters is not currently possible. This is because Oxfordshire uses separate computer software for letters and discharge summaries that is not part of the EMIS software (the clinical computer system in use in practices), though integrates with it. This is a shame as it would probably be one of the more useful aspects of this service.

So the decision is yours, but we hope to have highlighted some of the pitfalls and issues, and that sometimes it is worth being careful what you wish for.