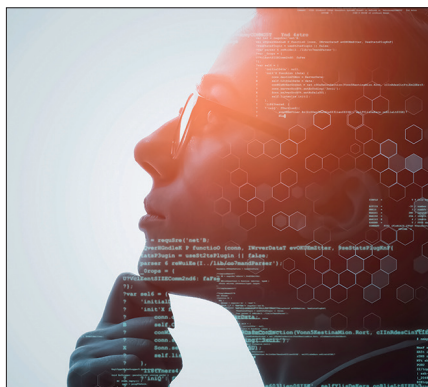# Life & Times
SNOMED CT:
working smarter, not harder

The challenges faced by general practice today are enormous. We are contending with the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, significant staff shortages, and an ageing and increasingly complex patient population. We need to become more efficient while improving care quality and safety. How can we do this? SNOMED CT (Systematized Nomenclature of Medicine − Clinical Terms) holds some of the answers, but many practices are unaware of its full potential.

WHAT IS SNOMED CT?

SNOMED CT is the world's most comprehensive clinical terminology and is mandated for use in the UK. It supports the standardised recording and encoding of patient information, including diagnoses, procedures, and medications. The terminology is designed to be usable in any electronic health record system. You may recognise codes and terms like this: '195967001 |Asthma (disorder)|'. These are called concepts in SNOMED CT. Every concept represents a clinical entity with a unique code and a series of descriptions indicative of its meaning. SNOMED CT is more than just a list of codes and descriptions; it is a computer-processable ontology. Every concept has a computer-understandable meaning called a logical definition. By using these definitions, thousands of different concepts can be linked together through parent−child relationships and other defining characteristics. As computers can understand and process these definitions, we can unleash their processing power to support our clinical and operational decision making.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

SNOMED CT can help us work smarter, not

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harder. Some practices utilise third-party products and consultancy to implement, use, and apply SNOMED CT. This can be costly and introduce unwanted dependencies where this function could be managed and served in-house. There is a multitude of benefits generated by using SNOMED CT, with significant value produced through:

- the creation of high-quality and reusable data;
- automation of reporting, analytics, and outcomes surveillance; and
- reliable data sharing between systems, staff groups, and care providers.

HIGH-QUALITY AND REUSABLE DATA

What are the implications for your patients if you make decisions using incomplete or erroneous data? Answers can range from minimal to life-changing! When SNOMED CT is effectively implemented, clinical staff can efficiently and accurately document and code relevant information in a universally understood format. As it is structured, instantly usable, and of high quality, the data can be recycled rapidly. For different use cases there is no need to 'reinvent the wheel' at significant cost and time. The same data can feed national reporting, case mix analysis, clinical audit, risk evaluation, and finance.

AUTOMATION OF REPORTING AND COHORT IDENTIFICATION

How much time have you spent manually reviewing patient notes to find relevant information buried within pages of the free-text narrative? SNOMED CT can help you steal this time back as it has a 'query' mechanism, which means we can accurately, quickly, and easily manipulate the terminology to help define and identify relevant patient cohorts for audit, reporting, and billing. SNOMED CT data are also robust and specific enough to support predictive and prescriptive analytics, which is critical for the growing movement towards delivering greater preventative and individualised medicine.

RELIABLE DATA SHARING

Have you ever wished you had more information about your patients and the care other providers have given them? SNOMED CT enables health data to be unambiguously and seamlessly shared between practices, hospitals, and other care providers using commonplace data technologies and infrastructure with appropriate data governance oversight. Such data transfer reduces the time spent on unnecessary administrative processes and supports the effective continuation of care. Imagine the benefits of having a shared problem list between your practice and local hospital(s). Crucially, data sharing forms a safety net for identifying hidden populations, such as those with a learning disability and autism, and preventing adverse outcomes.

WHAT CAN I DO?

A national priority is to raise awareness of the importance and uses of SNOMED CT. SNOMED International have helpful resources and training courses aimed at all levels of understanding and needs (https://www.snomed.org/snomed-ct/education). Quick and easy wins can be derived using the terminology to automate data processes and support data reuse for clinical audit, reporting, and analytical activities. Early engagement with clinical partners and relevant third parties will be beneficial in taking steps towards meaningful and reliable data sharing. Working closely with your health record provider is paramount. Successful data sharing will lead to large-scale quality, safety, and productivity improvements.

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