

Professionalism, Pandemics and Ransomware: Coping with Challenge and Uncertainty

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The recent cyberattack on Ireland's health system has added further challenge and uncertainty to our health and social care professionals, already exhausted from their heroic efforts in the national response to the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Over the last year we have seen the Covid-19 global pandemic emerge to become the greatest health, economic and societal catastrophe of our age¹. The human cost is truly staggering, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reporting worldwide over 175 million confirmed positive cases and 3.7 million deaths, amongst them many health and social care workers, and each and every one a tragedy². We have taken great hope from the response of our health and social care professionals to this great challenge. We have witnessed compassion, duty, altruism and heroism³. They have confronted the unknown, placed themselves in harms-way, because it was the right thing to do; to help patients and support colleagues. They have worked long hours, learned new skills, worked online, redeployed and endured those same social restrictions. Furthermore, the collaborative effort to develop and administer effective vaccines must rank amongst modern humanities greatest achievements⁴. Health and social care professionals have truly done their duty but at enormous strain and on an already overburdened, understaffed and under-resourced healthcare system. It has exposed the great inequalities in our healthcare and in our society. Recently, hope emerged that the pandemic in Ireland was waning, whilst remaining cautious as other countries worldwide continued to struggle and concerns emerged regarding new variants. We had perhaps taken a brief moment to breathe, before we rallied again to begin the even greater challenge to rebuild services and address the enormous backlog of delayed care⁵.

Then just one month ago cyber criminals used the human-operated Conti ransomware to target the IT network of Ireland's Health Service Executive (HSE) early on the morning of the 15 May 2021, with severe impact on clinical services⁶. The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), has said restoring the IT systems which have grown and evolved over 30 years will be a monumental task.

The Hackers, allegedly a shadowy group called Darkside, have targeted a variety of agencies worldwide for financial gain without regard for human cost. Apparently, patient records are big business, with stolen health credentials fetching upwards of 10 times the value of a credit card number⁷. Ireland's Health Service once more had to prioritise patient safety and maintain critical clinical services in a very difficult environment. Impaired access to patient records, information management systems and timely accurate diagnostic tests creates a risk to patients and service users of inadvertent clinical error, human error, delayed diagnosis, and delayed treatment. The State Claims Agency (SCA) also recognised the risk practitioners face.

Technology's role in healthcare has expanded exponentially over the last 20 years, improving the safety and quality of care, becoming essential to modern health systems and clinicians' practice. Revolutionary advances such as Electronic Health Records (EHRs), provide clinicians with immediate access to past medical history, laboratory and imaging results, and important alerts, such as allergies. Email, Mobile Health and Telemedicine have revolutionised how we connect to and access healthcare. However, that reliance on technology can bring overdependence with serious repercussions when connectivity fails or security is breached⁸.

It is understandable many professionals feel they have reached the limits of their ability to cope. Resilience, oft quoted as an ability to rebound quickly from adversity, under repetitive strain has limits. Perhaps some reflection on our motivation to become and be a professional, may help. As professionals we strive to embody values, behaviours and relationships which enable our patients to trust us at their most vulnerable with their health, wellbeing and lives⁹. It is a great privilege and a great responsibility. Our professionalism has been tested to its limits and beyond. Compassion, altruism and duty; these values and behaviour underpin public trust that we shall act in their best interests, be compassionate and empower them to make the best available choices. Compassion allows us to understand another's suffering and moves us to provide relief. Despite the risks we selflessly placed ourselves at risk to help patients and support each other. As professionals we have a duty and performing one's duty may require some sacrifice of self-interest. However, ordinary morality does not normally require beneficent acts of maximum altruism, such as professional's putting their lives at risk to provide care¹⁰. These extreme beneficence acts are commitment well beyond duty and may be considered heroic.

The great medical educator William Osler said, "Medicine is a science of uncertainty", and most of medicine is uncertain, professionals encounter it every day. However, continual challenge and uncertainty is tough, it brings disorientation, uncertainty, insecurity and fear. It is exhausting, mentally and physically. Medicine has few occasions when we are certain, we constantly make time-limited high-stakes decisions with limited information. Epictetus, a famous Stoic Philosopher, reminds us "The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control". Our goal should not be to eliminate uncertainty but to develop that art of making the best of the available choices. Healthcare strives for excellence in patient care but should not forget its most valuable resource is a dedicated high-quality workforce.

Health and social care professionals have endured these challenges, reciprocally, employers and professional bodies must ensure staff are supported through and beyond in respect to wellbeing, career, licensing and indemnity.

The only real certainty is neither Covid-19, nor Ransomware, will be our last challenge and we must reflect personally and organisationally upon our preparedness and resilience. We must build more resilient systems, resilient workforce and a work environment in which all can thrive.

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