BARCODING

COULD THE SIMPLE BARCODE SAVE THE NHS?

Complacent or just plain old-fashioned? Whatever the case, the NHS must embrace technology faster for the sake of the patient, as well as the purse

NHS sustainability and transformation plans (STP), covering the period October 2016 to March 2021 have been published. Referring to the NHS chief executive's 'Triple-Aim' of: improved health and wellbeing; transformed quality of care delivery; and sustainable finances.

MEETING THE FIVE YEAR PLAN
During the Christmas 2016 period, Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt spoke about the use of barcode technology. He stated such damning statistics as: 'Twice a week we operate on the wrong part of a patient's body'; 'Once a week the wrong prosthesis is put on a patient's body'; 'We often cause death by administering the wrong drugs' and 'Twice a week we leave a foreign object in a patient's body'.

The positive side of the Jeremy Hunt message, and the optimistic aims of the various STPs is that all of this is avoidable. Often as simple as the introduction of barcode scanning which (according to the Department of Health press statement the same day) is commonplace in major industries such as aerospace and retail. TV interviewers seemed astounded that such simple, everyday technology is not already in use. Especially when the financial business case has been made that the costs of implementation will be far, far outweighed by the monetary savings. Add to that, the improvements in patient safety, and all three 'triple-aims' have their boxes ticked.

The NHS has been ridiculously slow to adopt common technologies such as the humble barcode. Yet elsewhere in service sectors, IT is totally intrinsic in what organisations do and how they behave. Before the industrial revolution, we used picks and shovels. Now we use tractors. We seem astounded that our finest institution, one that makes us the envy of the world, the National Health Service, is facing issues – higher demand; cost controls and efficiency conundrums. But they are. And we need to ensure they get on with modernising, to cope better.

EMBRACING EFFICIENT SYSTEMS
The answer is to embrace more efficient systems. Just as every UK business and global corporation has already done.

Become 'lean'. Every process they have must come under the microscope. And potential savings calculated. Then ranked in order of the best return on investment first, with a keen eye on what improves safety too.

BBC headlines on the 29 December 2016 focussed on the PIP implant scandal of a few years ago. Illustrating the urgency for the NHS implementing good track and trace (barcode scanning) systems citing: 'Some 400,000 women were affected in 65 countries'; 'It is thought that about 47,000 British women had the implants'; 'Many were fitted by the NHS'; 'There were 4,000 reported ruptures'; 'Many women are unable to find out if they had been given the faulty implants'.

There has been a lot of activity to create clear and compelling arguments for trusts to take action. Excellent documents such as the Carter report and the Wachter Review.

BARCODING BENEFITS
There's now a GS1 barcoding compliance requirement for all hospitals. And six well-funded demonstrator hospitals charting the areas for instant success and quick wins. The financial business case is proven.

The benefits of barcoding include facilitating non-clinical staff to move to a proactive, systems-driven paperless pathway and facilitating clinical staff to reduce administration paperwork, increasing bedside time. It also includes ensuring that records are accurate, electronic and easy to interrogate, so that there can NEVER be another PIP implant scandal, with patients at-risk because of poor record-keeping procedures. Implementing the technology is easy. A simple scan of the patient's wristband and scan of

the material pack is all that is required to:
a) record what was consumed during an operation;
b) record the whereabouts of what may need to be recalled;
c) create an automated replenishment order based on actual usage; and
d) deliver an accurate patient and procedure-level cost analysis.

Assistive Partner is working with a number of trusts throughout England, helping to deliver a digital future and ensure a future-proof operating system across the trust. The company has helped trusts develop a 'spend-to-save' business case and is mostly based upon the use of smartphone apps for mobile working and barcode scanning. Use of their software has demonstrably positive stories for pathology samples, continence deliveries, internal parcel distribution and hospital asset management. Assistive Partner's hospital inventory management software is simple to use and swift to implement. The business case for its deployment is easy to create and will show how an investment of less than £60,000 per annum is very likely to deliver savings of well over £400,000 per annum when just deployed in a hospital's operating theatre environment. The NHS (which arguably has more personnel educated to degree level than most organisations) knows there are savings to be made from investment in systems – spend to save. Frankly, if fairly everyday organisations such as supermarkets, clothing firms and DIY chains can do it – so can the NHS. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION
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