

end of the paper trail?

This Countess of Chester Hospital case study offers an insight into the effect technology can have on the delivery of healthcare services



The mounting burden of the NHS paperchase: Janet Hallmark, a medical secretary at the Countess of Chester Hospital, surrounded by paper records

The Countess of Chester Hospital, a first-wave NHS Foundation Trust in Cheshire, has launched a unique IT system providing reciprocal links for clinical correspondence between the hospital and GP surgeries and social services teams.

By allowing the most up-to-date patient information to be shared electronically, the software has helped management to improve standards of patient care, increase efficiency and reduce costs. As well as helping to manage bed-blocking for patients requiring social service, the move has saved the Trust around 17,000 administration hours a year.

HOW WAS THIS ACHIEVED?

The Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has a long-standing commitment to using technology to improve efficiency and patient service.

The 625-bed hospital in Cheshire invested in cutting edge communications software to make the working lives of both its medical secretaries and the GPs it serves significantly easier. The clinical correspondence system, designed by Medisec Software, automatically generates clinic attendance and discharge notification letters, and sends them electronically to 43 GP practices in West Cheshire and North Wales, giving them instant access to real-time clinical patient information, including radiology and A&E reports.

Recent benchmarking research at the hospital has showed that the process saves secretarial staff at the hospital between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of their average working day. Given that the secretarial staff at the Countess handle more than 300,000 clinic attendance and discharge letters every year, this equates to the above-mentioned 17,000 saved

administration hours for the Trust. Building on the success of the scheme, and well ahead of the Connecting for Health agenda, the management team has recently expanded its use into two key areas: patient discharge planning and electronic referrals from GPs.

PATIENT DISCHARGE PLANNING

Like most other hospitals, the Countess has experienced bed-blocking due to administrative delays with discharge planning and social services teams. The Community Care Act 2003 highlighted the benefits of effective discharge planning, and the Trust looked into the development of a 24/7 electronic communications link which automatically alerts social services to the status of patients.

The technology ensures that patients do not have to spend longer than they need to in



hospital, and that when they do leave, they are discharged appropriately with all the care services they need already in place.

The new system has created a manageable process for the hospital which clearly identifies 'bed block' days. Previously, nurses at the Countess had to telephone, fax or write to Cheshire Social Services to discuss patients' needs when discharged. Now they can send patients' requirements direct, through a secure electronic communications link between the hospital's wards, Discharge Liaison office and Cheshire social services offices.

Patient access manager Audrey Houghton explains: "The new system means that nursing staff can refer patients to social services at any time of the day or night - without having to wait for office hours."

By standardising the format of the discharge forms, the new system also makes it easier for nurses to provide all the necessary information directly to the people who can act upon it. Social services have instant access to information on any changes that occur, such as a change of ward or patient's discharge date. Staff now receive complete, accurate, up-to-date information enabling them to prepare an appropriate package of care for the patient's return home, and ultimately helping them to maintain their independence.

The technology allows social services to begin planning for the discharge of patients

with more complex needs at a much earlier stage. Knowing what patient needs are on the horizon also helps social services management to plan team workloads more efficiently.

ELECTRONIC GP REFERRALS

The Countess has also recently launched the UK's largest electronic patient referral system, allowing GPs to make fast, secure electronic patient referrals at the touch of a button.

More than 2,600 e-referrals are now being made every month from surgeries in Cheshire, Flintshire and the Wirral - more than a quarter of all the referrals received by the hospital. The new technology allows GPs to transmit referrals straight from their practice system to the hospital and to monitor the progress of each individual case in the event of any query. As all the relevant details are automatically delivered to the correct contact at the hospital within a few seconds, referrals cannot be lost in the post or misdirected, saving patients from potential long delays before they are treated. Dr David Morris, from St Mark's Dee View Surgery in Flintshire, explains: "Before the new software, we would produce the referral, print it out and put it in an envelope. Now, the patients love seeing the flash, confirming that the hospital server has received the referral, before they get up from their chair in my consulting room. It's very reassuring both for them and us."

The software has been designed to dovetail



New technology provides quick access to patient information tailored to clinicians' needs

with existing systems in surgeries and the hospital, and supports both the introduction of the Connecting for Health Choose and Book system in England, and the aims of Informing Healthcare in Wales. Standardised templates, created in close collaboration with the PCT, GPs, hospital clinicians and the Countess of Chester IT team, produce more accurate correspondence by automatically triggering all the required information, ensuring that each of the hospital departments receives the most relevant and useful information for their needs.

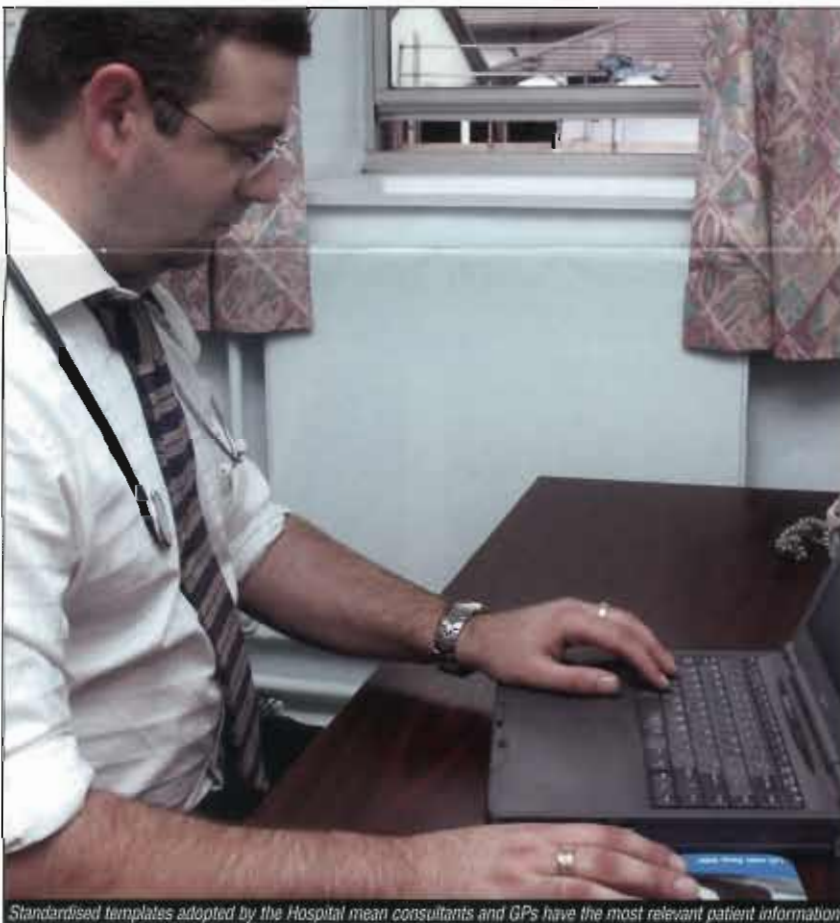
SHARING INFORMATION

Allowing GPs and consultants to share patient information far more effectively has played a major role in improving the standard and speed of care at both the surgery and the Countess of Chester.

Monique Duffy, Assistant Director IM&T - Planning & Development from the Countess of Chester, commented: "In collaboration with the GPs, we have defined some mandatory fields for the referrals. This gives us much more control over the quality of the patient information we receive from GPs, helping our consultants to offer patients a better quality service."

The system provides the hospital with case management tools and workflow facilities to enable referrals to be processed efficiently and provide safe storage and a full audit capability. It picks up the referral in the hospital and either associates it with the correct patient in the Master Patient Index, or triggers a new registration.

The software makes it possible to speed up the patient pre-registration process by providing semi-automatic entry into the PAS system, using colour coding to identify individual case status. Files turn from orange to pink to red as time passes to highlight those cases which still need processing, in time for when the patient calls to set up their appointment the following day. □



Standardised templates adopted by the Hospital mean consultants and GPs have the most relevant patient information