Why a simple bar code can change the tide in the NHS

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Setting the standards for digital projects within the NHS can only work with clinical input and understanding the small details that make up a successful system, says Stuart MacMillan, interim consultant on Scan4Safety, who is speaking at the upcoming *Healthcare Partnership Network* *event.*

Nobody thinks that data sets and bar codes are the most 'attractive' part of working in the NHS. What is attractive is cared for patients and staff who have the processes and resources to optimise that care. Marry these concepts together, and life becomes simpler for everyone. This is why projects that can do this are so important, especially when they can get the job done while ensuring financial stability within a Trust.

In some areas of the country, projects to simplify product procurement and patient care are already underway, like the Scan4Safety project taking place in Leeds Teaching Hospitals and several other Trusts across the UK. How has this been achieved, and what does the future hold for projects like these when financial uncertainty hangs over the healthcare system?

Start small, end up big

What NHS bosses can sometimes overlook is the minute details that form the well-oiled machine of our healthcare system. Procurement, invoicing, waste disposal, supply chain processes, and least of all, product bar codes. These are all seemingly bland parts of the system that nobody will touch. Nevertheless, overlooking these 'boring' areas can result in clunky processes and a sea of data that is not being used.

What if we did focus on the smaller details? What if we focused on details as small as a bar code? The idea started off as a project in 2014 and has since been rolled out in NHS Trusts nationally, with three standards set for the NHS: a location identifier, a product identifier and a patient identifier. Trusts have interpreted these three standards and introduced measures that have automated and streamlined manual processes all the way through the Trust, from product to patient. We have product tracking elements and patient tracking elements that ensure safety, and have proven that starting small can have big implications on the overall system.

Improving patient outcomes

The best outcome we envisioned for Scan4Safety was enabling Trusts to increase their operational maturity and streamline processes, giving clinicians time to focus on patient care that is organised and error-free.

For staff, understanding where every single patient is in their journey can be laborious. Using the standards laid out by Scan4Safety, a patient-tracking element was introduced so staff can access this information at any point.

Looking in detail, having bar codes, scanners and patient-tracking elements at every turn could elicit a negative perception by the patient – why are you watching me? Why do you need to know that detail? When, in reality, results from projects like Scan4Safety have shown that most patients consider a certain level of scrutiny to be safer. If a nurse is tapping away on an iPad during a check-up, she is putting data into the system that will have otherwise, perhaps, been forgotten or lost. The work to help the patient is being done during the consultation, making it a more productive use of the nurse's time and showing the patient that level of scrutiny they find reassuring.

Of course, positive outcomes for staff and patients aren't the only result of digital projects like Scan4Safety.

Answering the question of finances is key to getting people within the Trust on board with any project. Balancing finances, as ever, is of utmost importance. The benefit-cost ration of these projects has been proven, and is perhaps one of the reasons that the DHSC is handing out less money going forward. Even without central funding, a project like this can beget a huge return on investment.

A constant learning curve

One problem with having a standardised set of guidelines is that they are open to interpretation by various people at various Trusts. These huge lessons have been learnt painfully and through experience, but no Trust will improve without accepting weaknesses and addressing concerns, as we have learned at Leeds Teaching Hospitals, who have pioneered this project. My panel discussion at next month's Healthcare Partnership Network will in fact be in partnership with David Berridge and Mark Songhurst from the organisation.

Every Trust has experienced a failed project of some kind. This can lead to a sense of malaise surrounding the idea of yet another digital venture – but the important thing is to find the people who *do* want to take part and champion them. Make them your spokespeople and your cheerleaders, because getting staff 'buy-in' is one of the most important things when considering a project like Scan4Safety.

Getting everyone on board with the small details that make up the running of their Trust will ultimately result in a functioning system with better outcomes, and that is what we

should all be striving for.

Stuart MacMillan will be speaking at the upcoming Healthcare Partnership Network, taking place at Oulton Hall in Leeds on 16th & 17th July 2019.