White paper:  
Creating the paperless NHS

A realistic goal for 2018?

“The NHS cannot be the last man standing as the rest of the economy embraces the technology revolution... Only with world class information systems will the NHS deliver world class care.”

So said Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health, when he laid down his challenge to the NHS to become paperless by 2018. But how realistic is this government ambition? How do NHS workers feel about it? And what do Trusts need to do to if they’re to meet the digital challenge?

This paper looks at NHS workers’ awareness of and attitudes to the concept of a paperless NHS, the benefits they expect it to deliver, and any concerns they may have. It also discusses the importance of working with a capable service provider who can accompany NHS Trusts on their journey to a digital future.

The digital challenge—awareness and attitudes

A study carried out among people working in NHS Trusts to explore attitudes to the challenge to go paperless by 2018 shows very high awareness of the initiative. This awareness permeates all the groups surveyed—heads of Trust, healthcare professionals and IT decision-makers—all of whom are generally enthusiastic about it and recognise the broad range of benefits for their Trusts of going paperless, or at least paper light.

This enthusiasm is more than just theoretical—NHS Trusts are already rolling out digitalisation programmes. The study shows that Trusts already have an average of 55% of patient records digitalised; and that the majority (almost 70%) have established a plan of action to realise the paperless initiative, with almost 80% saying they’ve budgeted for the implementation. Trusts whose share of NHS England’s £500m Safer Hospitals, Safer Wards Technology Fund for developing integrated digital care records has been approved are well placed to start—or continue—their journey from paper-based to digital record-keeping.

The benefits of going paperless

The Secretary of State for Health describes the top-level benefits of a paperless NHS as “saving billions, improving services, and helping to meet the challenges of an ageing population.”

His vision for 2018 is for patients to have integrated digital records that will enable their health information to follow them around the health and social care systems. In practical terms, that means that whatever someone needs—from a GP to a hospital to a care home—the professionals involved in that person’s care can see their history and share vital information at the touch of a button, with no more disconnected paper records leading to a partial view, a slow response, or an inappropriate intervention.

Paper records are unwieldy, can only ever be in one place at a time and are easily lost.

Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health

1 The digital challenge: http://digitalchallenge.dh.gov.uk/2013/01/16/paperless/
2 Vanson Bourne: Digitalising NHS patients’ records, November 2013 (on behalf of Perceptive Software)
The study carried out among NHS workers shows that there are no objections to going paperless: quite the opposite, in fact, with overwhelming support for it among heads of Trust, healthcare professionals and IT decision-makers, and a range of benefits identified for both patients and staff. Heads of Trust are unanimous in believing that going paperless will improve patient faith in the NHS; and two-thirds of healthcare professionals believe it will improve patient care—all of which resonates perfectly with today’s emphasis on patient-centric care.

Given their frontline roles, it’s hardly surprising that healthcare professionals tend to prioritise the practical benefits of going paperless, such as easier sharing of records, reduced requirements for storage space, quicker access to data, and fewer lost records. IT decision-makers, on the other hand, prioritise the benefits of reductions in paperwork, costs and working hours and, crucially, improved protection and security of patient data. Only 2% of all those who participated in the study failed to identify any benefits from going paperless.

Figure 1. Expectations that the paperless initiative will improve patient faith in the NHS
What are the top concerns about going paperless?

NHS workers see far fewer issues than benefits with going paperless. And given the generally positive view of the paperless initiative, it’s perhaps not surprising that the concerns expressed are less about the paperless model once it’s implemented, and more about how the transition will be managed. The two concerns reported by the majority of study participants are the cost of the transfer of data (expressed by 68%) and the time that will be spent on the transfer (55%).

Just under half of participants are concerned about the risk of digitally losing data once the model is established. Realistically, however, going digital should reduce this risk compared with using paper records. Indeed, 78% of healthcare professionals cite fewer lost records as a key benefit of paperless working.

But the big question raised by the study is whether the goal of eradicating paper throughout the NHS by 2018 is truly achievable. Heads of Trust are generally much more optimistic than other groups about the likelihood of being paperless by 2018: over half consider it to be a realistic goal, compared to just under a fifth of IT decision-makers and healthcare professionals. These latter groups say that being paper light by 2018 is a more achievable aim, and suggest that, on average, 2021 is a more likely date for being completely paperless.

Figure 2. How realistic is the goal of being paperless by 2018?

Choosing the right solution provider for the digital journey

There are mixed opinions within NHS institutions about what stage the paperless initiative is at today. Heads of Trust and healthcare professionals estimate that between half and two-thirds of patients already have digitalised records. In contrast, NHS IT decision-makers—who may be expected to have the most accurate view on the topic—believe that less than half do.

Either way, it’s clear that, although the process has already started for many Trusts, there’s still plenty of work to be done to get to a paperless state. Trusts that haven’t already digitalised all patient records estimate that doing so will take an average of three years.
Figure 3. The length of time NHS workers believe it will take to finish digitalising patient records in their branch

The Secretary of State for Health has made it clear that there will be no nationwide rollout of a single solution for creating a paperless NHS. Referring to the Safer Hospitals, Safer Wards Technology Fund, he says: “…rather than imposing a clunky one size fits all approach from Whitehall, this fund will empower local clinicians and health services to come together and find innovative solutions for their patients.”

So the onus is on individual Trusts to choose which providers they work with. While many Trusts have already implemented some form of electronic medical record (EMR) system, these systems can’t manage paper-based content. Nor can they manage unstructured digital content such as clinical images, digital photos, scanned documents and video files stored in other standalone systems, such as a picture archiving and communication system (PACS) or vendor-neutral archive (VNA). A lack of integration and interoperability between all these systems means that the patient experience suffers and health outcomes can be compromised as clinicians struggle to retrieve all the required information at the point of need.

So what can be done to resolve this complexity and accelerate the move towards a paperless state—while allaying concerns about the logistics involved in the transition? The Trust needs to find a way of integrating all of its disparate systems into a single unified Trust-wide content platform that will act as the foundation for the transition to paperless working.

Such a platform will allow a Trust to manage, store and access all forms of electronic and paper-based patient data efficiently and effectively in a single content repository; convert more paper-based information to digital; and enable clinicians and other staff to view all relevant information alongside the EMR. And because the platform integrates existing systems, there’s no need to rip and replace, which helps the Trust protect its investment in an existing PACS, VNA or other content management system.

Any unified content platform a Trust selects now must support the Safer Hospitals, Safer Wards Technology Fund’s ultimate purpose of delivering integrated digital care records. Among the capabilities the solution must offer is support for using the NHS number as the unique patient identifier in the future.
Conclusion

As the study shows, there’s no doubt in the minds of the vast majority of NHS workers that going paperless will deliver significant benefits in terms of patient care and help to enhance patients’ perception of the NHS. Enthusiasm for the initiative has been translated into plans of action and budgets for implementing paperless systems; and money from the Safer Hospitals, Safer Wards Technology Fund has been allocated to support these programmes.

Even so, there’s some doubt about whether paper can be completely eradicated from the NHS as early as 2018. Going paper light by that date is considered a more realistic aim, and should be achievable by Trusts that have the funding in place and choose the right providers to work with to bridge the content gaps between EMR, PACS, VNA and other electronic systems, and paper libraries.

Perceptive Software is one of only a small number of providers offering a unified content platform solution that can integrate a Trust’s disparate systems in this way and underpin a smooth transition to paperless working. Perceptive Software’s solution enables access to all relevant content to create a more complete patient record. Ultimately, it has the capability to deliver the fully integrated digital care records envisaged by the Secretary of State for Health.

Case study: Alder Hey Children’s and Liverpool Women’s NHS Trust

With more than a million paper records, Alder Hey Children’s and Liverpool Women’s hospitals were facing a massive clinical risk. The CIO for these two foundation hospitals recognised that by removing reliance on paper-based documents in favour of a digital system, the entire approach to patient records management could be overhauled, improving patient care and achieving cost savings.

The Trust decided to implement an enterprise content management system (ECM)—a clear indication of its intention to move away from paper and make patient information available to clinicians at the point of need. It chose Perceptive Software’s Content solution, a technology that would integrate with its existing MEDITECH clinical patient information system and other core systems, without a huge investment on the Trust’s part.

Now when a clinician views a patient record in MEDITECH, they see a prompt to access additional digitalised information in Perceptive Content. “The biggest benefit for clinical staff is having a single view of all the information they need pertaining to a patient’s care, in one place,” says the CIO. Implementing Perceptive Content has resulted in a 70% reduction in scanning time and 40% decrease in touch time to seek information.

Next steps

Talk to Perceptive Software to find out how your Trust can realise the clinical and administrative benefits of going paperless as efficiently as possible, and achieve each of the steps on the journey to paperless working outlined by the Secretary of State for Health. Whether your Trust has made significant or little headway in digitalisation, we can help.

Relied on by healthcare organisations throughout the UK and the US, our flexible, scalable solutions integrate seamlessly with any health information, clinical or business application to connect people to the right information at the right time and help optimise the delivery of patient care.