

Cash till technology for hospital patients

Barcodes will be used on the wards

EXCLUSIVE

By Louella Houldcroft

PATIENTS at a North-East hospital are being barcoded as part of a pilot scheme to cut down on the number of mistakes made trying to decipher doctors' handwriting for drug prescriptions.

Millions of forms are filled out by hand every day in hospitals across the UK, ordering everything from blood tests, drugs and x-rays to patients' meals.

With so many pieces of paper flying around and an increasing pressure on doctors' time, it's hardly surprising that in almost 5pc of cases - affecting around two million patients - forms have to be sent back for clarification or mistakes are made.

Now a team of pathologists at Gateshead's Queen Elizabeth Hospital have developed a pioneering way of eliminating the errors.

By issuing everyone with a barcode printed on their hospital wristband, doctors and nurses are now able to "swipe" patients and send orders directly to the relevant department.

Team leader Chris Chariton, pathology service manager, said the key element to the new system was that it removed human error.

"It only takes one small error - such as recording an abnormal potassium level against the wrong patient - and the result can be fatal," he said.

"Doctors are extremely pressed for time and at the moment they do their rounds of maybe 30 or 40 patients and then return to their office to fill in the paperwork.

"It's not surprising that errors creep in, mistakes are made or that some of the millions of forms go missing.

"With this new system the doctors can call up the patient's details and order the relevant tests at the bedside."

The so-called "order-com" works via a hand-held scanner, one for each doctor and nurse.

By scanning the patient's wrist-band, basic details such as name and date-of-birth are immediately called up and from that the doctor can order any relevant test.

If samples are needed, labels are automatically printed out complete with the relevant barcode.

This is the first time in the country that a system of this kind has been used.

Currently the barcodes have been trialled only in the medical admissions unit but there are plans to roll this out across the whole hospital early next year.

Wendy James, project manager, said it was not only a fool-proof system



Reading between the lines: Dr Catherine Hood tests out the barcode system, and below, the information is analysed.



but also reduced the time it takes to get the test results.

"Until now the fastest we could get a result was between three and four hours," she said.

"Now the turnaround time can be as little as 30 minutes - the minimum time it takes to carry out the test.

"When you are dealing with so many samples, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, improving accuracy and speed is crucial."

Dr Catherine Hood, based in the Medical Admissions Unit at the QE, said: "We spend hours filling in forms and writing patient details on the side of every sample bottle," she said.

"It's such a waste of valuable time that should be spent with the patients.

"Once the project is up-and-running it should make a huge difference."

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