
UK Health Secretary Challenges NHS to go Paperless by 2018



Better use of IT could save more than £4billion and reduce hassle for patients and staff

The NHS should go paperless by 2018 to save billions, improve services and help meet the challenges of an ageing population, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said today.

In a speech to the Policy Exchange, Mr Hunt said that patients should have compatible digital records so their health information can follow them around the health and social care system. This means that in the vast majority of cases, whether a patient needs a GP, hospital or a care home, the professionals involved in their care can see their history at the touch of a button and share crucial information.

His speech comes as two reports are also published which demonstrate the potential benefits of making better use of technology. This includes cost savings of more than £4billion, freeing up professionals' time to spend caring for patients and helping patients take control of their own care so they can spend more time getting on with life instead of visiting their hospital or GP when they don't have to or want to.

On the way towards the 2018 goal, the Health Secretary wants to see:

- By March 2015 – everyone who wishes will be able to get online access to their own health records held by their GP;
- Adoption of paperless referrals – instead of sending a letter to the hospital when referring a patient to hospital, the GP can send an email instead;
- Clear plans to be in place to enable secure linking of these electronic health and care records wherever they are held, so there is as complete a record as possible of the care someone receives;
- Clear plans to be in place for those records to be able to follow individuals, with their consent, to any part of the NHS or social care system; and
- By April 2018 – digital information to be fully available across NHS and social care services.

The NHS Commissioning Board is leading implementation and it has set a clear expectation that hospitals should plan to make information digitally and securely available by 2014/15. This means that different professionals involved in one persons' care can start to share information safely on their treatment.

Jeremy Hunt said:

"The NHS cannot be the last man standing as the rest of the economy embraces the technology revolution. It is crazy that ambulance drivers cannot access a full medical history of someone they are picking up in an emergency – and that GPs and hospitals still struggle to share digital records.

"Previous attempts to crack this became a top down project akin to building an aircraft carrier. We need to learn those lessons – and in particular avoid the pitfalls of a hugely complex, centrally specified approach. Only with world class information systems will the NHS deliver world class care."

Tim Kelsey, National Director for Patients and Information in the NHS Commissioning Board, said:

"I welcome Jeremy Hunt's challenge to unleash the power of information and technology for patients and those who serve them. We are committed to transforming transparency and participation in the NHS – the digital data revolution is key to improving outcomes and putting patients and carers more in control."

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Jeremy Hunt's speech came as two new reports were published which demonstrate the potential benefits to staff and patients of greater use of digital technology in the NHS. A PwC study reviewing the potential benefits of better use of information and technology found that measures such as more electronic prescribing and electronic patient records could improve care, allow health professionals to spend more time with patients and save billions.

The report highlighted findings of NHS studies that demonstrated the benefits of effective use of information and technology. For example:

- The Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital conducted a trial of a system that asks spinal surgery patients to record their progress on an iPad while in hospital, then at home through an online system after being discharged. This created an estimated 300 new outpatient appointment slots per consultant surgeon per year – so they could spend more time with more patients. 95 per cent of patients preferred the new online process to the traditional pen and paper method;
- Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen Hospitals Trust trialled a computerised paperless system on its haematology and dermatology wards. This meant that professionals could see GP referral letters, letters from clinics, test orders and X-rays. They found that they could save half an hour in a three and a half to four hour clinic; and
- Doncaster and Bassetlaw Hospitals brought in an electronic prescribing system which meant that the accuracy of prescriptions was radically increased and they estimated the system could reduce potential adverse reactions to drugs by up to 60 percent.

A National Mobile Health Worker report, also published today, was a pilot study on introducing laptops at 11 NHS sites. The benefits found included:

- North Tees and Hartlepool Foundation Trust found each clinician could save as much as £889 per year by reducing unnecessary journeys. The mileage that staff normally clocked up from driving to and from hospital in between visits fell, because health workers could log patient information on the laptop;
- John Taylor Hospice near Birmingham found that using laptops more than doubled the amount of time clinicians could spend with patients; and
- Clinicians also found the number of 'No Access' cases – where they visited a patient's home and were unable to gain access because they did not know the secure key code – reduced significantly, as they were able to verify the code on the laptop. The study found NHS Northampton could save as much as £978 from No Access visits per clinician, per year.

Published on : Wed, 16 Jan 2013