

Ireland's health care on the move

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Ireland's community nurses give help in people's homes

Community nurses in Ireland have been given Blackberry communicators to help them spend more time with patients and less time filling in and filing paper records.

The project to equip the nurses with communicators is part of a grander scheme to overhaul Ireland's Southern Health Board (SHB) central records to make them accurate, up-to-date and easy to query.

The 2,000 nurses of the health authority are at the forefront of a huge project to overhaul the technology used by the nation's health service.

The Southern Health Board's technology revamp has been so successful that it has now become the blueprint for a national plan to update technology in Ireland's entire health service.

Community care

The SHB serves a community of 600,000 people centred around Cork and along Ireland's southern coast.

Prior to getting the communicators the nurses, who provide care to patients in their homes, spent a lot of time during two days of their working week picking up and dropping off paper files for the patients they were due to visit.

Now, said Ursula O'Sullivan, one of the SHB technology managers behind the project, nurses can get records while they are on the road.

"It gives them a whole extra day to visit people and they're confident that the information is up to date for the patient they are seeing," she said.

"They no longer need the actual files," she said.

The SHB settled on Blackberry communicators after trialling laptops and HP Jornada handheld computers to give remote access to records. Software from technology firm Citrix helps coordinate the transfer of data.

Nurses get patient information via Blackberry communicators

Ms O'Sullivan said the plan to make patient data available via wireless networks was driven by the fact that approximately one-third of the SHB's 18,000 staff spent most of their working week away from health board offices.

Record breakers

Key to the project was an overhaul of the filing system that holds details about patients.

Work to tidy up the mountain of information about patients revealed how messy the paper records had become, said Ms O'Sullivan.

"When we amalgamated the records the amount of duplication was quite impressive to say the least," she said.

The average amount of duplication in paper patient records is thought to be about 17%, said Ms O'Sullivan.

However, the SHB discovered that its duplication was running at nearer 30%. This was partly due to the fact that many Irish people have two names - a native one plus an Anglicised version.

"One person had 17 versions of themselves including four times as male rather than female," said Ms O'Sullivan.

Also, she said, many patients were entered on waiting lists for procedures more than once.

"It's given us the chance to clean our records," she said. "At least now we are confident that we have one of everybody."

In the first year alone the SHB has saved more than 1m euros in postage as now appointments are only issued to one person at their correct address.

Also GPs in local surgeries now have instant access to up to date records of treatments patients have received instead of having to wait for paper files to be sent out to them.

The SHB is now experimenting with video conferencing for consultants and specialists to speed up the process of seeing patients.

The project to clean up central patient records and make them available to field workers has been so successful that it is now being used as the basis for a huge national project to consolidate all 11 of Ireland's health boards into one national entity.

Once complete this ambitious project will give all 98,000 staff in the consolidated health service access to electronic patient records.