

Keeping healthy records

The “paperless NHS” may be several years away, but ensuring that electronic information management is effective and safe will require the right tools says BSI’s Risk Specialist, Suzanne Fribbins

The risks associated with the continued reliance on the use of paper based records and the absence of electronic patient records in the NHS is well documented including risks relating to the availability and completeness of medical records, together with their upkeep and ownership.

Following the 2013 call to create a “paperless NHS” by 2018, there has been much talk of moves to electronic document management systems, with the area of health records management in the midst of a major transformation.

What will changes mean?

Proposed changes are expected to bring about improvements in patient safety, improve the experiences of patients and health care professionals, and deliver high quality care and improved efficiency.

Additionally, there have been many legal claims of negligence involving incomplete patient records and difficulties in establishing the sequence of events leading to their existence. Should this occur, having a paperless system will go some way towards possible reductions in the level of compensation being paid out by the NHS, a figure which has peaked at £1.3billion per annum.

Area focus to date?

Digitizing patient records has been the focal point in the journey to becoming paperless. However despite some moves towards the adoption of electronic document management systems, a strategic approach to document scanning in the NHS is uncommon. Many trusts are still grappling with how to ensure the full availability of digital patient records information across NHS and social care services ahead of the 2018 target.

Those trusts taking a strategic approach to document scanning are taking an in-depth look at what it is they want to scan and whether to tackle the entire organization, or focus on individual departments or specific patients’ records first. Also the availability of electronic files, and how they can be assured that the scanned documents are legally admissible needs to be taken into account.

Before trusts make the investment in scanning technology, it is important that they get the underlying process right.

BS 10008 Evidential Weight and Legal Admissibility of electronic information

The British Standard BS 10008 can help trusts in implementing and operating an electronic information management system covering the capture, conversion and storage information in an electronic format. It has been designed to help organizations identify the relevant risks to their electronic information and manage the availability, completeness, and accuracy of it over time.

Some of the benefits of a paperless medical records system include:

- Provides a central authoritative source of data - the most current records are always available remotely, as well as locally
- Removes issues with potential duplication of disparate records
- Eliminates need to transfer paper based medical records between locations
- Enormous saving of space - one server, or cloud based system takes up a lot less room than rows or rooms of patient records and files - space which may be better used, e.g for clinical purposes
- Documents become highly searchable
- Reduces expenses - files online are much cheaper to store than physical files
- Backup becomes feasible and simple - remote storage of backups is simple, and prevents data loss
- Enables authorized access to data from remote locations - providing great benefit to acute trusts in that community services or satellite hospitals can now have access to records without need to transport paper based records

Important factors to consider

A key decision for trusts in embracing the "paperless NHS" is the decision of whether to setup an internal scanning bureau or outsource, utilizing the services of external providers offering dedicated scanning bureau's to digitize medical records. Some trusts are choosing to adopt a mixture of the two. Either way, it is important that it is done in accordance with a recognized best-practice framework if the NHS is to deliver the world-class care it aspires to.

The decision also has to be made whether to scan all medical records, or scan on demand or scan forward documents only, ensuring that money is spent only on scanning active records, with in-active records simply stored until such a point as they can be legally destroyed.

BS 10008 covers any form of electronic information, from scanned and word processed documents through to AV files and CCTV video streams and ensures there is a secure system in place to manage it throughout its lifetime.

Keeping electronic records that may need to be produced as evidence in disputes is presenting an ever increasing risk for trusts. Before paper records are destroyed, they have to be scanned in such a way that the electronic version can be used in court. Scanning needs to be carried out in accordance with BS 10008 to ensure it stands up in court and is legally viable. It is the responsibility of individual trusts to check whether an outsourced provider is accredited to the required standards.

Information security

Information security is a significant factor when discussing and/or assessing legal admissibility issues. Often it will be related to the authenticity of the stored information. For example:

- When was the electronic information captured by the storage system and was the process secure?
- Was the correct information captured, and was it complete and accurate?
- During storage, was the information changed in any way, either accidentally or maliciously?

Best practices in the industry have solved these issues using versioning, checksums, and additional data integrity practices to ensure that the data remains trustworthy. In addition, for most e-data elements, validation can be programmatically performed to ensure that vital pieces are never omitted.

However with one issue resolved there arrives another. Once document conversion has occurred, a sound information security protocol will also highlight what to do with all the paper already generated. As paperless hospitals become more prevalent, destruction and disposal of secure records has become an industry in its own right. Trusts must ensure that when paper records are destroyed either by themselves or a third party that it is done so in a secure manner.

Implications elsewhere

Application of paperless record keeping is not simply a matter for just the NHS and the implications for businesses of all sizes are far reaching. A recent survey for World Paper Free Day and YouGov research shows that 80% of UK businesses still print off documents to obtain 'wet' signatures. In 2008 small and medium-sized enterprises wasted more than £42.2 million per day in revenues looking for documents something that could easily be remedied by creating a paperless office. Now with BS 10008, this is no longer an obstacle but a potential remedy for a growing problem.