



MANAGING COMPLAINTS IN THE NHS

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ABOUT

The NHS is coming under increasing scrutiny over the way in which it manages complaints.

It was a tough winter for the NHS. Tight budgets, staff shortages and higher than expected demand has put services under immense strain. The result – longer waiting times, an increased risk of clinical error and a poor experience for patients, all of which contributes to more complaints. With many of those complaints focusing on how other issues have been handled, the NHS needs to improve the way it manages and processes patient feedback

ON THE RISE



Complaints have been growing for several years. The number of written complaints received by the NHS increased by 4.9% according to a report entitled Data on Written Complaints 2016/2017. That equates to more than 500 written complaints every day.

The rise is firstly down to the growing pressures the NHS finds itself under. According to a report from NHS England, the health service faces a funding gap of more than £30bn over the next five years.

Recruitment is an ongoing problem. The Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt has set ambitious recruitment targets; unfortunately, as things currently stand, such targets are likely to be missed with the NHS losing a growing number of doctors and nurses from EU countries since the EU Referendum.

At the same time, demand for its services is increasing. An aging population means more people are living with ongoing and complicated conditions putting services and personnel under an unprecedented amount of strain. As demand grows, it becomes increasingly difficult to meet ambitious waiting time targets whilst also ensuring the highest possible quality of care.

While the pressures on the NHS contributes to a rise in complaints, they are also being pushed up by a population that is becoming more demanding. We are a nation of consumers; we have come to expect high quality and convenience in every part of our lives, and when we are made to wait, we are more likely to complain. Whilst the NHS may be working hard to improve standards, it continues to face an uphill task to close the gap between expectation and a reality in which you can order your groceries online and have them delivered in the same day, but struggle to get an appointment with your GP in the very week you called them.

THE COST OF COMPLAINTS



Complaints rising is one thing, but what's really important is how those complaints are handled. Complaint management is a critical part of any business, but in the NHS it can be a matter of life and death.

A document produced by the Ombudsman in 2015 highlighted what is termed as 'the human cost of poor complaints handling within the NHS'. The report found that nearly half of written complaints were about how complaints and issues had been handled. During a two-month period the Ombudsman found 58 cases of avoidable deaths and upheld 29 of those complaints. It suggested that many of these problems could have been avoided if doctors and nurses had taken more time to act in line with guidance and good practice.

The clearest example of what can go wrong occurred in 2013 when an enquiry into the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust found that unaddressed complaints had caused needless suffering to hundreds of patients. In his report, Robert Francis QC stated that poor complaints handling had allowed problems to remain unchecked and poor practices to persist.

"A health service that does not listen to complaints is unlikely to reflect its patients' needs," he wrote. "One that does will be more likely to detect the early warning signs that something requires correction, to address such issues and to protect others from harmful treatment."

Improving responsiveness to complaints, then, should be a top priority for all NHS Trusts. Unfortunately, some are more advanced than others. Part of the problem stems from the complexity of current complaint handling systems. The NHS is keen to be transparent and encourage learnings from complaints, but the literature and processes involved can be complicated. Administration systems are often out-of-date, paper-based and fragmented.

ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE MANAGEMENT

Technology – as so often – can help towards finding a solution. The right software is opening up new opportunities for business. The market is growing at more than 30% year on year according to Synergy Research Group.

Harnessing the power of the cloud, these systems can manage large quantities of data, streamline workflow and provide accurate real-time analytics. They enable managers to manage the data from every aspect of hospital operations, can share information between departments and draw up enhanced real-time analytics which provide clear and up-to-date information.

Such systems have enormous potential to improve patient experience and the way in which complaints are managed. Their value stems from their ability to handle, collate and analyse large quantities of data, deliver insights and provide a flexible intuitive platform which can be easily integrated into existing systems.

One of the leading names is Aptean Respond. With a cloud-based (optionally on-premise) platform that allows users to collate, store and view all cases, hospital staff can see the status of each patient, visitor or relation's case and check it has been – or is in the process of being- resolved.

Problems and positive comments can be logged with just a few clicks. Integrated workflow features guide staff through their tasks and can be marked off as each one is completed. Open cases are clearly marked which makes it much more difficult to create risk by overlooking a case.

Managers can view the history of each case, so they understand what has happened and what interactions the hospital has already had with the patient.

In addition, reports can be quickly generated and distributed to all relevant stakeholders. They enable the users to quickly gain valuable insight into patient feedback, see where issues are arising and react to patterns of complaint.

It offers, therefore, three distinct capabilities. It allows NHS Trusts to:

1. Gather information easily and store it in accessible locations. Information can be stored in one location accessible by all stakeholders.
2. Track each case and deliver a timely response. You can see the status of each case, track progress and see when it has been resolved.

3. Report and improve. By quickly generating and distributing reports, you can identify emerging trends, see where the service needs to be improved and act accordingly.

The system hits a number of key pain points for NHS managers. It addresses one of the key concerns of patients – that they are not being listened to.

DELIVERING A SUCCESSFUL SOLUTION



It all works very well in theory, but whether or not this will be successful in practice depends on what technology is used and how it is put into action. Jeremy Hunt's drive to modernise the NHS depends on the introduction of next generation IT systems. A host of developers are producing a range of products which claim to streamline processes and improve the way in which the NHS meets its key targets. Some will be better than others.

To identify the best option, managers will have to set goals and decide which system will help the most. The superior products will not only collate data, but also enable reports to be drawn up quickly and shared across teams in multiple locations. They facilitate fast responses and help you to derive learnings from your feedback.

The key to the success of such systems is their ability to be flexible and provide a good service to different organisations, of different sizes and in different sectors. To do this, users need an intuitive interface which can be configured to any requirement.

On top of that they will also need specific industry expertise. For this, partnerships are key. Aptean, for example, strengthened its healthcare market expertise when it acquired Medworxx in 2015. Medworxx manages patient bed flow, helping hospitals to address bed utilisation challenges. Aptean also has a significant NHS footprint

with its Verdiem solution that provides both energy efficiency and a wake on WAN solution. The connectivity platform, for example, facilitates a two-way information exchange between its systems and solutions from other suppliers with triggers, alarms, and other advanced features to make the information exchange simple and reliable.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the better the health service becomes at managing complaints, the happier patients will be and the more their services will improve. At a time of rising demands and shrinking resources, technology such as this is no longer a luxury, but indeed a necessity.



Aptean provides very specific industries with very specific ERP, supply chain management, and customer experience solutions. In today's fast-paced, highly competitive economy, organizations don't have time to waste forcing homegrown software, spreadsheets, and one-size-fits-all solutions to do things they were never designed to do. Aptean is on a mission to end those workarounds – with industry-specific solutions instead of generic software, expert support instead of making you go it alone, and a steady influx of new ideas instead of the status quo. For more information, visit www.aptean.com.