Patient information travels fast

APS has significantly reduced the burden and timescales for publishing and updating more than 1500 patient information leaflets at a major UK NHS Foundation Trust, in addition to ensuring consistency and accuracy of formatting and paving the way for public online access.

Dealing with over a million patients each year, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust provides a full range of local hospital and community services for residents of Sheffield, as well as specialist care for patients from further afield. The Trust has a history of high quality care, clinical excellence and innovation in medical research.

The provision of patient information is a key part of this care. Some 1500 patient information leaflets are currently produced by the Trust, and are used every day by staff and patients. Including details about hospital procedures, services, medications and conditions, most of these leaflets are given out as part of routine clinic appointments or as part of a patient's preparation or recovery.

The availability, timeliness and accuracy of these materials has to meet standards set by the NHS Constitution, those of the Care Quality Commission and the NHS Litigation Authority. The information must include risks, benefits and, if appropriate, alternatives to any proposed course of treatment or surgical procedure.

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals' patient information leaflets are managed locally by a network of 160 Patient information Leads, supported by a small Patient Information Team who oversee the development and review of information, and by the Medical Illustration department, who support the illustration and design of the leaflets.

The majority of leaflets are produced as A5 booklets, which may range from a simple 4-page instruction leaflet to a 40-page guide. There are also A4 factsheets and DL leaflets. These were being produced by the Medical Illustration team using professional design software, then digitally printed externally as well as being published as low-resolution PDFs on the Trust's intranet. This system worked well for a number of years and had brought a certain amount of standardisation to the visual style, but could only be updated by Medical Illustration staff which meant that even simple date changes could have to wait several weeks to be processed.

Burgeoning portfolio

With a continuous improvement in standards, there was a need to update leaflets on a more regular basis, which increased workload for the staff responsible for producing and maintaining the documents and caused growing delays in leaflets being updated. In addition to this, the Trust took on responsibility for a range of Community Services, which added hundreds of leaflets to the portfolio, many of which had been created using Microsoft Word or Publisher and lacked consistent formatting.

"To address these growing workload issues we decided to hold a stakeholder event to discuss ideas for future development," says Evans. "We considered subscribing to an external service but its range was not broad enough and it would have required sign-off from all the departments involved as it couldn't be funded centrally. We wound up asking that provider what they used and that's where we learned of APS from Interlagos."

The word-of-mouth recommendation wasn't sufficient in itself to make the decision to proceed with APS, as Evans explains:

"Within the NHS we have strict tendering protocols and need to consider other solutions. We have a range of criteria to judge each system against, including impact on our own IT department, the quality of document templates and typographical control to meet NHS identity guidelines and accessibility standards."

Other system selection criteria included ease of use and intuitiveness of the interface, the ability to provide different levels of access

and workflow reporting tools. A Microsoft Word-based alternative was considered but was ultimately rejected in favour of APS, largely on the grounds of its typographic and layout capabilities. "The finished look was important to us, it has to be professional," comments Evans.

Publishing process transformed

To make the transition to APS, the Trust hired a temporary administrator to migrate all existing content to the content management system within APS, a process which required extracting the text from over 1000 PDF documents, plus the upload of images as necessary from the Medical Illustration department.

Official publishing of leaflets with APS began in May 2013 and has dramatically streamlined the process, bringing it under full control of the Patient Information team, and significantly reducing the demands on the medical Illustration group who are now able to focus on their core design work without being constantly distracted with requests for minor text changes and other updates.

"Simple changes can now be made at the click of a few buttons and leaflets republished in minutes," says Evans, adding "and changes to static text such as our copyright and alternative format statement can be made across all documents in one go. It saves us a great deal of time."

Consistency across A4 factsheets, A5 booklets and folded DL leaflets is now ensured and templates have been set up to meet best practice guidelines for accessibility, in which font choice, size, emphasis and other typographic and layout parameters are defined and automatically implemented.

APS can also optimise the PDF documents it produces for cost-effective printing by allowing the inside pages of documents to be set to black and white where appropriate, which results in reduced external printing costs.

The workflow reporting requirement is addressed by APS too. "The system shows where a document is in the development process, if it's with the author for editing or review, ready for further work by our team, complete or published," explains Evans.

Evans and her team were very pleased with the development, implementation and maintenance support they received from Interlagos. "They were incredibly supportive throughout," she confirms. "We're really

APS templates ensure that all patient information publications follow NHS identity rules, including standards for accessibility.

pleased with the results and can't believe the transformation compared to a year ago, how easy it is to produce these documents now."

Wider access

Further developments centred around the APS implementation include support for Easy Read, a document standard developed for readers with learning disabilities, for which Interlagos has already developed a template, plus wider access to the system so that individual Patient Information Leads – clinical staff and other healthcare professionals who contribute to and review leaflet content – can update the material themselves, saving the time it currently takes to re-enter and check any changes.

Plans are also well-advanced to make the content of the various leaflets available to the public via the Trust's website. APS supports direct output to HMTL as well as PDF, so this will allow material to reformat for display on devices such as smartphones and tablets where the screen size makes viewing print-based PDFs impractical. This will also help to avoid the potential information overload when patients are given everything at once in printed form when they visit the hospital.

"We will point people to the website for information," explains Evans, "and expect this to become the normal route in years to come. Previously, we couldn't even get at the text in our leaflets but now we are much more in control."

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