Global identifiers for enhancing efficiency and patient safety

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This volume of the World Hospitals and Health Services (WHHS) Journal focuses on how global identifiers (barcoding) can support the monitoring of safe healthcare and improve efficiency while reducing waste.

Healthcare automation and digitization offers the opportunity of improving patient safety and efficiency, even if at the same time there are still some challenges that need to be solved. Making sure patients are diagnosed correctly and that they will receive the right treatment at the right time is always an essential concern for healthcare workers. Care is intended to do good to the patients and not to bring them harm. However, there are countless examples of identification errors that have caused harmful effects in patients. A recent, dramatic example involves a doctor that performed brain surgery on the wrong patient.

The use of the automatic identification and data carriers (AIDC) technology, like barcode scanning, proves to be a great enabler of patient safety. Although many countries and hospitals now use barcodes, there is a need for a global system that goes beyond the borders of a department, hospital or country. This technology also offers the opportunity for improvements in efficiency and combating fraud, such as in the stocking of drugs in pharmacies and identification of drugs or devices that are not counterfeit.

Automation and the implementation of barcoding standards in a healthcare environment requires vision and training. This issue of the Journal highlights diverse examples from several countries in which barcode scanning using a global AIDC-system is implemented for patient safety purposes as well as for efficiency and a better healthcare supply chain.

IHF has developed a survey to better understand the use of global identifiers in healthcare organizations around the world; the results reported in this issue underscore that there is a lot of room for further use of global identifiers to enhance the safety and efficiency of health services to patients.

GS1 is a non-profit organization that develops and maintains global standards for business communication. Several of the articles in this issue highlight how GS1 standards and identifiers have capabilities for full interoperability across hospitals, healthcare supply chains and even country borders.

In several countries, AIDC use regulations act as drivers to combat falsified medicines, improve recalls and reduce reimbursement fraud. Manufacturers and suppliers comply with these regulations. Products that are identified by the manufacturer and can be monitored along the supply chain improve patient safety and increase health system efficiency.

As explained by several authors, one of the most critical steps toward patient safety is correct patient identification. Apollo Hospitals Group, from India, describes the results of a long-term implementation, including barcode-scanning and an appropriate mix of culture change in the form of ‘Our Patient, Our Responsibility.’ New IT developments in Canberra Hospital, Australia, support safer processes to ensure positive patient identification by using identifiers as building blocks. This has led to more than 40 percent reduction in wrong-blood-in-tube incidents based on clinicians scanning barcodes when collecting pathology samples. In Danish hospitals, the focus has been on full traceability of staff and assets, also using global location identifiers. In Brazilian, Colombian and Dutch hospitals, the primary focus has been on closed loop medication administration safety with barcode assisted bedside scanning. In Japan, the Fukui Hospital Surgical Center created an integrated sterilization management system for traceability and patient safety using the global AIDC system, also leading to efficiency gains in the deployment of nurses. The case study from the US describes how collaboration and the introduction of global identification standards brought increased patient safety in operating rooms. In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) applying standards to people, products and places, helped quantifying the costs and benefits across the organizations. Learnings from each trust have provided a wealth of knowledge to help future NHS implementations.

All these cases show that staff hours can be gained, errors reduced, and the work environment made more sustainable.

The International Hospital Federation is committed to helping its members improve patient safety and efficiency in health care delivery. AIDC global standards make a significant contribution to this effort.