

Could NHS WiFi help to reduce A&E waits?

Record numbers of people are using hospital WiFi. This could be an unprecedented opportunity to engage millions of patients with information that could help to address everything from A&E pressures, to CQC findings, discharge processes, and much more. James Morriss, SPARK TSL, explains.

Media reports that as many as one million people cancelled home broadband in just 12-months, became widespread during 2023. Based on research from Citizens Advice, the findings illustrated the challenges facing households during the cost-of-living crisis.

In parallel, WiFi usage in NHS hospitals has soared. Across every NHS trust we support, service delivery reports have revealed sharp rises in patients accessing free WiFi available on the NHS estate during their visit to hospital. At one of those trusts, more than 500,000 individuals access the WiFi each month.

More than just demonstrating the increasing importance placed on this service by the public, this could be an unprecedented opportunity for NHS trusts to engage millions of patients with information that could make a significant difference.

Doing so requires action, senior buy-in and an urgent examination of how information could be communicated to patients.

Could WiFi help with A&E pressures?

As many thousands of patients face A&E waiting times of 12-hours or more, hospitals throughout the country are now engaged in social media campaigns, urging the public to consider alternative services, for example NHS 111.

But what if a patient hasn't engaged with their Facebook or Instagram posts?

With so many patients now using WiFi, trusts could transform WiFi log-in screens to engage patients who have arrived at A&E with messages that in many cases are already being circulated on other channels. They could also potentially validate if the patient needs to be there.

Before patients start scrolling, the log-in screen could show them average waiting times, and could be configured to signpost them to other appropriate services that might be able to see them much sooner.

It would be wrong to suggest that the complexity of demand faced in A&E could be solved by WiFi. But this is one example of how a WiFi splash screen could be used for more than accessing the internet, and how thinking differently about the way it is used, could make a difference to people receiving care and providers who are under pressure.

Alleviating patient anxieties – starting in the car park

There are many other examples of where re-thinking the presentation of such a frequently used touch point, could make a difference to how patients experience their hospital visit.

Often, patients might arrive at hospital unsettled, if they have had to spend time finding a parking space, before entering a maze of corridors to try to get to their appointment on time.

This can be quite a stressful experience for anyone, potentially adding to any existing anxieties that a patient might have around the reason they are attending hospital.

Car parks cause complexity for NHS organisations themselves. One recent roundtable attended by NHS estates leaders, revealed that one trust had inherited six different car parking payment systems across its hospital sites.

Patients having to navigate these systems before they even get through the hospital doors, are encountering stress that could be avoided if hospitals were to think differently about WiFi infrastructure already in place.

Rather than a patient having to find and decipher payment machines, before they rush to their appointment, a WiFi screen could be set-up with functionality to allow them to pay, or top up their car park, in ways that suit them.

More than that, it could be set up to provide patients with directions to the right department, or signpost them to coffee shops and other facilities on site, so that they might arrive to their appointment a little more relaxed.

Engaging patients during their stay, responding to CQC findings

The same technology could be used to engage patients throughout their stay. Recently, one NHS trust initially set out to procure WiFi entertainment services, but decided to expand the project to respond to CQC findings. The team seized the opportunity to think holistically about patient needs, and wider trust objectives, using WiFi to also actively inform patients about their care needs, how to better their own personal health, relevant services available, and how to make appointments.

WiFi could do more still. Libraries of applications and rich information, accessible via hospital WiFi, could be relatively easily created, to provide a platform for developers to deliver new solutions designed to address unmet patient needs. Such libraries could also inform patients about their care, set their expectations on what will happen and when, allow them to video call family members, or to order meals appropriate to their needs, to describe just a few examples.

It could be a means to disseminate important information contained in countless leaflets in the hospital – some of which patients might not feel comfortable picking up if relating to sensitive subjects.

Providers could even use such a platform to provide advice to patients ahead of discharge in ways that might potentially help to reduce unnecessary readmissions. This might include video advice on self-care, for example, or on medicines, showing patients how they should take medicines, reinforcing messages given by ward staff.

Engaged patients might also tell hospital staff how services could be improved. For example, WiFi screens might ask people to complete a Friends and Families Test, before they browse online services.

From hotels to shopping centres – other sectors are doing this

Using WiFi in such ways is new for the NHS, and requires buy-in from both senior leaders and people on-the-ground.

But there is evidence of this working well in other sectors. From hotels, to shopping centres, to airports, WiFi often provides customers with the opportunity to order food, access entertainment, navigate services, and even pay for parking. It can play an important role in user flow.

The NHS now has similar opportunities to use WiFi to address specific challenges and strategic objectives. Some of these opportunities might even seem small, but collectively, the impact could be significant.