

Unlocking the 10 Year Health Plan

The government's plan for the NHS is a huge document. Jane Stephenson, chief executive of SPARK TSL, argues the key to unlocking its digital ambitions is to consider what it has to say about the shift from CDs to digital music.

How can trusts and health boards make the same shift from analogue to digital delivery, while lowering costs and improving satisfaction and engagement?

The government has published the 10 Year Health Plan that it says will deliver “radical change” in the NHS and create a more local, more personalised experience for patients.

Fit for the Future is a big document. Online, it runs to more than 160 pages. So, it's important to find a way in. One of the things that struck me was a panel a third of the way through, which talks about using digital to improve financial sustainability.

This panel says: “In other industries, digital technology has fundamentally disrupted the status quo. Listening to music no longer requires the manufacture of a physical CD, its distribution to shops, or the costs of physical retail space. Higher convenience, at a far low unit cost.”

Built to support digital delivery

Why did this stand out? Well, SPARK TSL was created to bring about exactly this disruption. We set out to deliver wi-fi to areas where it was hard to deploy and to help businesses to use that connectivity to deliver digital services to their users.

We work in marinas, shopping centres, and conference centres; but we have developed a specialist health practice since we started working with a London trust 20 years' ago.

Almost every hospital trust and health board in England and Scotland now uses SPARK Connect wi-fi, our patient engagement solution, or the bedside units that we acquired with Hospedia towards the end of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are also starting to see trusts adopt the SPARK Fusion platform that we are promoting into the NHS since acquiring and enhancing it from the Sentean Group in the Netherlands, where it is used by leading hospitals to put productivity and patient apps into the hands of staff and patients.

Analogue to digital, or old tech to new?

This is another reason that panel stood out. It was the digitisation of music, so that it could be burned onto a CD, that paved the way for the streaming services that we use today. But the delivery mechanism moved on.

Back in the day, the Hospedia units were just as revolutionary. They did away with payphones in hospital corridors and TVs that had to be wheeled onto wards, so every patient could watch the same programme.

Today, they have had their time. Since we acquired Hospedia, we have been encouraging trusts and their charities to consider the role of the ‘patient pays’ model and to work with us to provide additional functionality and services that will make the lives of staff and patients better. Now, we are planning to ‘end of life’ the old units next year.

However, as we do that, trusts will be able to use the valuable infrastructure that sits behind them – the trunking, power, and wi-fi services – to deliver entertainment, communication, and information to patients, over modern bedside units, iPads, and patients' own devices.

So, what strikes me is that one of the big shifts that the 10 Year Health Plan wants to see is from analogue to digital. Yet the NHS has been deploying digital for 30 years and, sometimes, what it has done is get stuck on old technology.

As trusts and their IT departments look to respond to Fit for the Future, they will need technology partners that can not just install new technology but maintain, refresh, and build on it.

By 2035, we know we will have refreshed the iPads that we are putting into trusts now at least twice; and we can predict that we will be running whole new packages of software as staff and patient requirements mature.

Change tech, change relationships

Going back to that panel: the move from CDs to streaming didn't just change the distribution mechanism for music. It changed people's relationship with it.

Today, people can compile playlists of the songs that matter to them, and get suggestions tailored to their needs – from working out to relaxing. In the Netherlands, hospitals also use SPARK Fusion to give patients more control over their environment.

They use the platform to run modern nurse call systems that allow patients to indicate what they need before busy staff head for their bedside, ensuring the correct staff member is assigned to the task. They support meal ordering apps that reduce waste by enabling patients to order food that fits with their tastes and condition, thanks to integration with administrative and clinical systems.

They also use SPARK Fusion to provide patients with information about their treatment, discharge and rehabilitation. In fact, patients can download the Fusion app onto their devices and take digital leaflets, medicines advice, physiotherapy exercises and other information home with them.

This helps to reduce the risk of re-admission and helps patients to get the best possible outcome. Which, of course, fits with the other two shifts that the 10 Year Health Plan wants to see, which are from hospital to community and treatment to prevention.

It also fits with the plan's argument about why those shifts matter, which is that they will improve productivity and deliver more personalised care.

The plan argues that it is "boosting operational productivity" that will enable the NHS to "restore constitutional waiting time standards and deliver increasingly innovative care." While it is "more precise prevention, and the information and tools that patients need to more actively participate in their own care," that will reduce demand in the long term.

What I take from this is that trusts don't just need to go from analogue to digital, or even old technology to new technology. They need to find the technology that will support productivity, excite staff, and engage patients.

At one of the first English hospitals to deploy SPARK Fusion, a survey has shown that 80% of patients are finding it easier to find educational content. The platform is putting information in patients' hands so they can act on it.

Feedback loops

Speaking of surveys. The 10 Year Health Plan outlines a new role for patient feedback. It says this could be used alongside league tables to support patient choice and that it could influence the rates hospitals are paid for treatment.

Our technology facilitates the collection of patient feedback. It can be used to run statutory surveys and drive-up completion rates. However, that is just a small part of the picture.

The big piece is to seize the opportunities presented by digital to modernise delivery and improve productivity and experience in the process. To do that, trusts and health boards need the right digital partner, with the right technology, and the vision to evolve that technology over time.

That's what will bring the "higher convenience, lower unit cost" services to the NHS that we have come to expect from entertainment and other digital experiences in our day to day lives.