

# auto-identification technologies

*New technologies such as bar codes and radio frequency identification are increasingly being introduced into clinical settings to reduce medical errors and therefore improve patient safety. **Christian Hay** of EAN International reports on a two-day Eucomed conference where participants shared their experiences of these new technologies.*

**How to encourage the introduction of auto-identification technologies into the medical devices supply chain was the question on everyone's lips at a two-day Eucomed conference in Brussels on 8th and 9th June.**

The 'Improving patient safety and supply chain efficiency through unique identification technology' meeting brought together users, suppliers, manufacturers, patients and clinicians to share their experiences of auto-identification technologies and how they can be used to improve patient safety.

The debate has progressively broadened, from one that was primarily about logistics, to a debate that now concerns the total supply chain from manufacturing all the way through to the hospital ward.

Day one of the conference was chaired by Richard Lilford, Professor of Clinical Epidemiology at the University of Birmingham. Keith Farrar, Chief Pharmacist at Arrow Park Hospital in the UK was the first to share his experiences of auto-id technology. He explained how medication errors are being reduced in his hospital pharmacy by using a robot to prepare the distribution of medication to patients. This, coupled with electronic prescriptions and pharmaceutical checks, has significantly cut the errors occurring at the hospital.

At the St Jacques hospital pharmacy in Nantes, Antoine Lecomte is finding that auto-identification technology is improving the traceability of products. An inventory of medical devices at the hospital revealed that many devices were not bar-coded. It was agreed to prioritise full traceability of products to high-risk medical devices, that is, both active and non-active implants. "Traceability is now secured on a permanent basis for these products", he said.

Elgar Fleisch, Professor of Technology Management and Director of the Institute of Technology Management at the University of St Gall, highlighted how the development of RFID tags is currently changing numerous processes, not only because the cost of the technology is reduced, but also because it allows more data to be stored and is compact in size.

Other users who shared their experiences included Paul Faklenstein from Becton & Dickinson in the U.S., who explained how the company is helping hospitals to enhance patient safety by enabling patient identification throughout a hospital stay. And Dr Wolfgang Neumann, Senior Vice President of Materials Management at Paul Hartmann AG spoke about how auto-identification technologies are impacting the medical consumables market.

Day two of the conference was chaired by Michael Kreuzer, ABHI Director of Regulation, who invited full audience participation. David Tutcher, Senior Project Manager at the NHS Information Authority reported on the UK Standard Clinical Products Reference Source (UKCPRS) programme, which is delivering the NHS Dictionary of Medicines and Devices. The dictionary will provide a stable, unique term (description) and identifier (code) for all drugs and devices used in the treatment of patients. It will become the NHS standard for drug and device identification, enabling clinical system interoperability by ensuring the safe and reliable exchange of information on drugs and devices.

In the first of two workshops, Ian Shepherd, Project Director on behalf of PaSA at Derriford Hospital, Plymouth, offered a strategic overview of the PaSA sponsored NHS pilot project in a large hospital group. The pilot, one of six UK projects to modernise NHS purchasing and supply,



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focuses on the replenishment processes and supply-related transactions of the supply chain. Orders are placed through Global Healthcare Exchange (GHX) and the suppliers send the hospital an EDI message - advance shipping notice - which refers to the unique delivery number. Delivery receipt is facilitated, manual key-entry of information is mostly eliminated and major benefits for the safe supply chain are demonstrated.

During the second workshop Christian Hay from EAN International presented the developments in the use of the EAN. UCC System, which standardises bar codes, EDI transactions sets, XML schemas and other supply chain solutions for more efficient business. By administering the assignment of company prefixes and coordinating the accompanying standards, EAN International and the Uniform Code Council maintain a robust item identification system.

As the conference drew to a close, Heinrich Oehlmann from the European Health Industry Business Communications Council (EHIBCC) cautioned that while huge advances in RFID technology are being made, these should be viewed as compliments to, rather than replacements of, barcodes. In giving participants the opportunity to express any concerns they have about the use of these new technologies, two key needs were identified.

First, the need to agree on a single classification scheme in the medical devices market. And second, the need to motivate the large number of medical devices suppliers who do not identify their products to adopt a standard system that does so.