

Can Smart Tech Help Community Nursing Teams Overcome Mounting Challenges?



Andy Goodman, Avoira's Head of Radio & Critical Communications, looks at how the latest generation of healthcare technologies can help community nursing teams better manage growing and increasingly complex caseloads.



Community nursing teams are currently facing a perfect storm.

As has been well documented, the NHS, as a whole, has suffered from a major funding squeeze.

The Health Foundation, in conjunction with the Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that, just to stand still, health spending needs to increase by an average of 3.3% every year for the next 15 years – and more so in the short-term to address the current shortfall. To secure “modest improvements” the annual increase would need hit four or five percent.

Never has it been truer that every penny of healthcare spending must count.

A growing and ageing population is increasing both the demand for and complexity of care. In addition, a core aim of the NHS Long Term Plan (LTP) is to move care away from hospitals and into the community.

The LTP has, for example, seen innovations such as virtual wards, which some 28% of district nurses report have increased their workload, with just 4.5% saying they delivered a reduction.

This, of course, places greater demands on already hard-pressed community nursing teams as their caseloads increasingly embrace people with a variety of complex care needs.

Those caseloads are also rising, resulting in 18.5% of referrals being refused daily and significant numbers of nurses reporting they're not able to provide care to their professional satisfaction, most notably psychological support (43%) and managing continence (31%). Unpaid overtime is the rule rather than the exception.

The numbers above come new Queens Nursing Institute's (QNI) District Nursing Today 2024 report which provides an excellent window on the challenges faced by community nursing teams.

Technological shortfalls

The QNI survey found that “district nurses often use outdated technology which can make it difficult to record patient information” and that technological shortfalls mean communication with “other healthcare professionals can be poor, which can lead to delays in care and a lack of coordination.”

As you might expect from a charity whose mission is to enhance nursing care in the home and community, it offers a cure:

“Investment in technology would provide district nurses with the tools they need to work more efficiently and effectively.... It would also include access to mobile devices, which would allow district nurses to document patient care and communicate with other healthcare professionals while they are on the go.”



I would add that it's not just investment in technology, but investment in the right technology - specialist technology - that will transform productivity, deliver operational efficiencies and enhance care. Technology that will also deliver cost savings, ensuring much-stretched budgets go further.

I am aware of one trust which, having deployed Zebra Technologies' devices in place of consumer mobile phones, secured a return on investment within just one year. Much of those savings came from better staff connectivity and workflow management enabling more efficient deployment of nurses. This dramatically cut petrol bills - and the team's carbon footprint.

Such technology also enables trusts to embrace 'zoning', whereby community nursing teams work a fixed patch, rather than, as one NHS sustainability manager put it, “driving around willy nilly”!

Tech that earns it stripes

I focused on Zebra devices for good reason as - and you must excuse the dreadful pun - their technologies have earned their stripes!

Zebra's range of specialist mobile computers and Workcloud Communication tools are the go-to solutions for healthcare administrators, procurement executives and nursing managers.

There are multiple reasons for this. For starters Zebra devices are designed for use in healthcare environments, so, for example, they can be routinely disinfected in support of infection control protocols.

Being dustproof, waterproof, drop-proof and tumble-proof, they're able to withstand the daily challenges which delivering healthcare presents.

But there's so much more to champion.

Real Time Location Systems (RLTS) enable the tracking of patients, staff and equipment, empowering administrators, nurses and support services to deliver faster, more attentive, efficient and better care.

For example, using RLTS in conjunction with Zebra's support for key communication and collaboration tools – high-definition voice, Push To Talk Application, Microsoft Teams, etc – means it's that much easier to quickly and efficiently direct community healthcare staff to the nearest patient, supplies or equipment.

Incorporation of the latest generation of transmission technologies - 5G and WiFi 6E – ensures consistently reliable connectivity and security.

The ability to integrate with communication and collaboration apps, over reliable and secure connections, will strongly resonate with community nursing teams.

Returning to that QNI report it noted that:

“There can be difficulties with communication and collaboration between different parts of the healthcare system which can make it difficult to provide seamless care for patients.”

Inbuilt RFID and ultra-quick barcode scanning also help reduce errors and enhance patient safety by ensuring patients are accurately identified throughout their care journey.

The ability to access and update Electronic Health Records and verify medication further safeguards patient wellbeing and speeds caseload management.

In addition, sophisticated wearable devices can track patients' vital signs and transmit the data in real-time to clinicians.

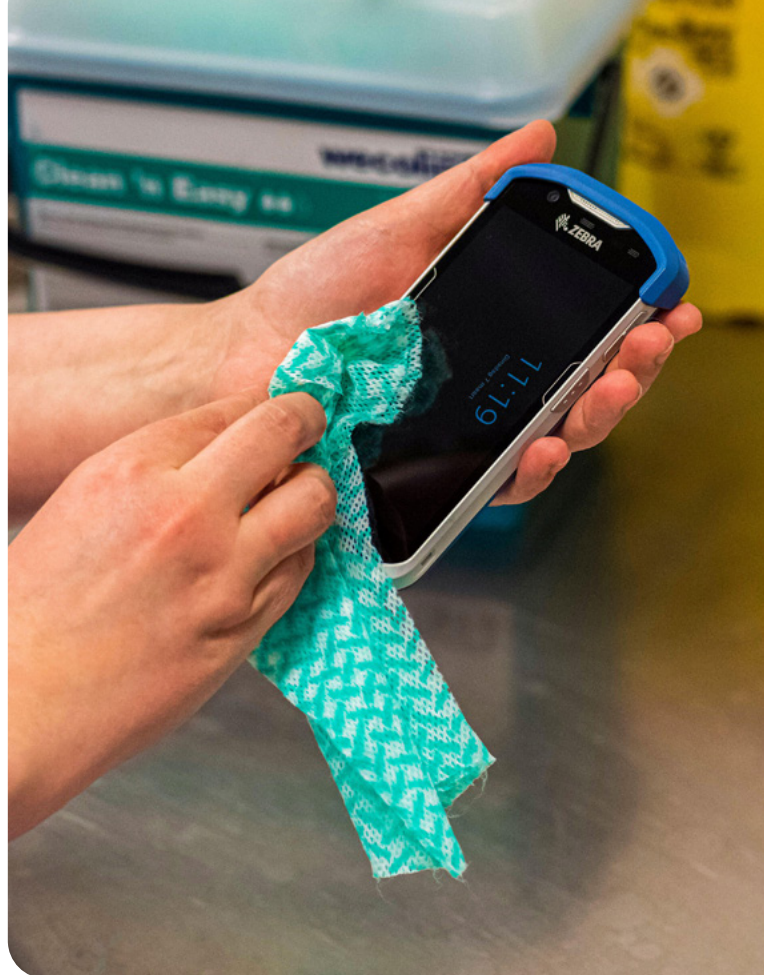


Sustainable benefits

Aside from the carbon-reducing operational benefits I've already touched on, Zebra's mobile devices tick many more boxes that will appeal to NHS sustainability managers.

Functionality sits high among them. The company's solutions offer 5-in-1 device convergence. So, for example, models in the TCx /HCx series of mobile computers incorporate an integrated scanner and NFC reader, smartphone, two-way radio and PC functionality.

This is important, not just for ease of use and efficiency, as it's the raw materials and manufacture of a device that creates the most carbon emissions. Rationalising from multiple to a sole device cuts the footprint and, of course, cost.



Zebra's manufacturing process is itself a cut above, planet-wise. Its devices contain no mercury, no "forever chemicals" such as potentially carcinogenic perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFO) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and no latex.

Built to serve a minimum of three years and backed by up to six-years repair and technical support and Lifeguard for Android OS and security updates, they also offer far greater longevity than a typical smartphone.

Energy efficient, easy-to-recycle batteries are complemented by Green Mode settings which enable intelligent limiting of power consumption across a fleet of devices.

This powerful combination of factors clearly supports NHS trusts' journeys towards Net Zero whilst maximising value-for-money. Environmentally and budget friendly.

Protecting staff

Other important benefits, ones which are key for those working in the community, are the push-to-talk private and group voice calling, man down, and distress signal functionalities inherent in Zebra's Workcloud Communication solution.

Add to the equation the GPS location services incorporated in mobile computers and you have a particularly robust safeguarding proposition for lone workers.

Tech support

The new Health Secretary, Wes Streeting, has stressed the need for the NHS to increase its focus on preventative healthcare and "a model where more services are delivered in local communities". He adds too that a "system reliant on pagers and fax machines is not fit for this decade let alone the next" noting, for example, the need for digitisation of children's Red Books, a move now set to happen.

It is clear that if community healthcare provision is to be a focus for growth – increasing demand and services still further – then it will be imperative that trust embrace the latest clinical, communication and collaboration technologies.

That's a process that can begin today. As we've seen, the technologies already exist which can aid the work of community nursing teams, streamline, speed and enhance patient care, and increase productivity - whilst supporting Net Zero goals and better protecting remote workers.



If you want to get going, to do more and do it better, let's talk!

Book a free consultation

☎ 0333 001 5151

✉ info@avoira.com

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