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Electronic patient referrals put safety first at Waitemata DHB

Improved patient safety, experience and outcomes sit at the very heart of a newly-launched electronic referral system at Waitemata DHB.

eReferrals replaces the old paper forms that were time-consuming to fill out and easy to lose track of.

It ensures that patients referred by doctors to specialist services get prompt care and advice from the right people via an online system that leaves no room for error.

Hospital-based clinicians and GPs all have on-the-spot visibility, giving them the immediate ability to confirm referrals have taken place, make new ones, document any changes in therapy, find alternative plans to help or get an instant picture of an individual's referral history.

"That alone means valuable time is not wasted with a patient having to retell their story again and again at each consultation," Waitemata DHB project lead Dr Lara Hopley says. "It's all there at a glance on a computer monitor where it can be viewed in context with whatever other computerised data we have for that same patient."

The system provides quicker and more comprehensive communication between health professionals associated with individual cases. GPs in the Waitemata catchment already use a very similar programme and its implementation within the DHB puts everyone on the same page.

eReferrals also, in some instances, eliminates the need for patients to come into hospital for an appointment. The appropriate specialist advice is simply keyed into the system for easy reference and implementation.

Dr Hopley has worked with a team of clinicians and administrators from each of metropolitan Auckland's DHBs to develop eReferrals so that it is now ready for use.

Auckland DHB is familiarising its staff with the system and Counties Manukau is expected to follow suit. Northland DHB is also likely to join in at some point in the future.

Similar systems are used elsewhere in the country but this is the first time a collaborative approach has been taken across multiple DHBs.

eReferrals is intuitive and alerts users to any potential issues – keeping the entire process error-free and ensuring no referral goes unnoticed. Referrals within and between hospitals and associated services are also copied to patients' GPs so that everyone is fully informed.

"One of the problems with the old paper system was that no one knew if a referral went missing," Dr Hopley says. "There was no way of seeing how it was tracking through the system or what the result might have been. Some referrals simply got lost and no one knew about it unless the patient brought the situation to their attention."

"We can, using this system, see what referrals have been sent, know they have reached their destination and have some oversight of the outcome. It gives us all massive visibility and the impact that has on patient safety is huge."

Waitemata DHB CEO Dr Dale Bramley says eReferrals is another example of digital technology being put to effective use in the health sector.

Other recent Waitemata DHB innovations include eVitals and ePrescribing - systems that dispense with potentially problematic paper-based processes to improve the sharing of key clinical information and the safe prescription of medications.

“We have a team of people dedicated to harnessing and developing these kinds of initiatives for the greater good and safety of our patients,” Dr Bramley says. “It is incredible to see just how effective this kind of work is and the enhanced ability it gives us to increase our quality of care.”

CAPTION: Dr Lara Hopley with one of the old patient referral forms that have now been replaced with a fully electronic system.

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For further information contact

[Waitemata DHB media line](#)

[09 4871276](#)