

Inventory management discussed on WHO's INFRATECH platform

Andrei Issakov on the importance of asset management and the different levels of technology that can be applied



INFRATECH is the Internet discussion group created in 1999 by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and the American College of Clinical Engineering (ACCE) providing a forum for global networking and exchange of information on various issues of common concern on healthcare infrastructure and technology management. It also serves as unique source of advice and assistance on specific problems facing its members in their daily work. It brings together several hundred members from many countries worldwide. All concerned with improving management of infrastructure and technology in health systems can join the list at <http://infratechonline.net>. During 12 years, INFRATECH members have discussed a variety of critical issues significantly contributing to the global knowledge base on the subject. An indexed archive of these discussions is available on the website. The most recent discussion was dedicated to inventory management. It was triggered by Rob Parsons of UK Health Partners International (HPI) concerned with the uncoordinated use of too many different computerised maintenance management systems (CMMS) all over the place. Too often all sorts of different software are chosen and obtained accidentally, without due consideration of local health technology management (HTM) and information and communication technology (ICT) aptitudes, compatibility with other systems, degree of the required external support, and many other factors thus seriously limiting realisation of such systems' potential benefits, and making them inappropriate, underutilised, and unsustainable.

Many HTM practitioners from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and several technical agencies responded. The overwhelming consensus was that it is not so much the software packages that should be standardised, but ideally the information that the inventory systems capture and produce. Furthermore, several comments indicated that all previous attempts to come up with a universal low-cost software solution for managing assets

in developing country health facilities have fallen far short from achieving the anticipated results, and this gap remains unfilled. At the same time, some systems have been mentioned as being widely used, including WHO/South African WamTech TeMP tool supported by WamTech (www.wamsys.co.za/projects/temp_features.html), Swiss Center for International Health openMEDIS system (www.swisstph.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Pdfs/Resources/openMDIS_factsheet.pdf), and PLAMAHS distributed by UK HPI (http://www.healthpartners-int.co.uk/our_expertise/plamahs.html).

It has been clearly said by many discussants that in many settings, the reality at this stage is not the need for an asset management software tool, but an urgent necessity to start with just the simple pencil and paper inventory, and very importantly doing this with understanding, dedication, and support from hospital administration. The proper management of assets in developing country health facilities is still commonly lacking, with or without software. A phased approach that methodically goes from nothing to paper records to Excel to dedicated database and finally to CMMS is what is generally needed.

The root cause lies in generally poor HTM capacity, lack of engagement of health service administrators, and insufficient appreciation and practice of all the different constituent aspects of the HTM life-cycle. Excellent contribution to the discussion has been made by Sam Byamukama, Biomedical Engineering Coordinator, Mengo Hospital, Kampala, who emphasised the need for a systemic approach to HTM whereby inventory management falls in naturally as part of GeMP, i.e. Good Equipment Management Practice. The main challenge lies beyond the HTM System, and if the way to embed HTM concepts, practices, and ideas within the broader Health Systems and Services Management is not found, the desired headway won't be made soon. What is urgently needed in the health sector policies and procedures are multi-disciplinary HTM task forces comprising people from health services management, finance, purchasing, supplies, asset management, and equipment users. These will go a long way to cause HTM key building stones to fall in place, inventory management inclusive. Full discussion with many interesting comments, ideas and experiences could be followed on <http://infratechonline.net>.

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