

Health

Is GS1 the solution?



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During the past two weeks we have been looking at the errors made in medication and medical practices. Interestingly, two letters to a medical magazine enforce the problems encountered, one is from a patient and one is from a doctor.

The patient, a woman writing from Ireland, explains how she was a victim of medical error by being given a well-known medication usually prescribed for epilepsy. She subsequently became ill with a swollen throat and a rash.

She was, however, told to stay on the medication and drink more water. This experience resulted in anaphylactic shock, and she was prescribed steroids and antihistamine tablets and injections. She

writes that she subsequently developed a thyroid problem, double-vision and painful muscles, tendons and bones besides losing her hair.

The second letter was from a doctor in the UK: "...few people realise the full extent of the dangers posed by taking medicines. Only a few patients complain about serious adverse effects, believing that doctors have done their best. But I wonder if people would be so relaxed if they knew that the pharmaceutical industry influences not only medical education, but also the scope of medical investigations. I have little sympathy with members of my profession who have become brainwashed into believing that the only route to success is via drugs and

expensive potentially harmful investigative procedures. I find that doctors do not know what prevention is.

"I have challenged this failure and been told that there is prevention - in reality, early intervention - but only after the disease is established. Prevention would damage industry profits, and this explains why everything is done to prevent what should be the most important part of a doctor's job. Medical textbooks in the past years have stressed the importance of nutrition, and how a lack of different minerals and vitamins can cause disease. Now, nutrition has almost vanished from the medical curriculum."

Clearly we need more doctors with this train of thought. However, for now, let's explore the GS1 organisation. This is a global organisation which has worked towards the global standardisation of a variety of products and processes. It represents 150 nations, working, probably without our knowledge, to benefit the population in a variety of ways. Many of us are probably not aware of their work with barcodes to ensure a standardisation worldwide: this extends to 'best before' dates, counterfeiting of any product, including drugs, tracing food to its source, logistics, and now to include electronic patient records, prescribing and many other medical processes which require standardisation and a clear tracking system.

GS1 rightly identifies that the medical sector is an extremely complex environment in which people, drugs and medical devices need to be permanently traced to ensure that the right drug is administered to the right patient, at the right time, in the right dosage. The organisation goes on to confirm that medical staff are only human, and unfortunately, this results in errors being made daily in hospitals worldwide.

"GS1 standards provide improvement to patient safety by matching patients to their care resulting in fewer medication errors"

However, hundreds of people die because of medication errors which could be prevented. In the UK, their work with key stakeholders to enable the Minister of Health to agree to mandate an agreed strategy, resulted in a meeting in 2005. An agreement was confirmed for the Department of Health to set up an early adoption team to investigate the feasibility of a mandated policy. In February 2007, Lord Hunt, Minister for Quality in Health, announced: "We have recommended that the GS1 System should be used for coding in healthcare, both by manufacturers of medicines and devices, and by NHS organisations. This recommendation will be supported by co-ordinated action from a number of agencies".

GS1 standards provide improvement to patient safety by matching patients to their care resulting in fewer medication errors, a reduced risk of wrong-side surgery and a more accurate trace of surgical instruments, equipment and other devices.

A report which was published in 2006 by the Council of Europe focuses on safe medication practices, called 'Creation of a better medication safety culture in Europe: Building up safe medication practices'. It really does clarify what is required to help eliminate unsafe practice throughout Europe.

GS1 is represented in Malta and further information on the global organisation can be viewed at www.gs1mt.org.
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