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The Time Is Right for RFID in Health Care

A lot of ink has been devoted to questioning whether radio frequency identification systems deliver a return on investment. Most questions surround the use of RFID in open supply chains. One issue that was clearly resolved in 2007 was that RFID delivers huge benefits for closed-loop

applications—and nowhere is that more evident than in the health-care sector.



Hospitals, clinics and other medical facilities have high-value assets they need to track and maintain. RFID makes this easy, while also making it possible to improve asset utilization and reduce the need to purchase additional devices. This application alone can deliver a huge return on investment—but RFID can deliver benefits in health care in other ways as well. These benefits break down into several categories:

Patient safety: Perhaps the most important application of RFID in health care is improving patient safety and patient outcomes. By tracking patients either with a 13.56 MHz wristband or a badge containing an active RFID tag, hospital staff members can make sure they give the right medication to the correct patient. Hospitals that have deployed wristbands find it easier to collect and record patient data accurately—and this frees up nurses to spend more time caring for patients, and less time performing mundane data-entry tasks.

Automated billing: One problem many hospitals share is accurately charging patients for procedures performed and devices used. By tagging such assets as stents and pacemakers, hospitals are automatically tying these devices to the patients that receive them, ensuring that the patients are billed for the care they receive.

Medical device tracking: A scalpel reused without proper sterilization can infect a patient with a deadly disease. By tagging devices, hospitals can confirm they have been cleaned and sterilized properly before reusing them, thereby reducing the hospital's potential liability dramatically.

Supply-chain tracking: Hospitals purchase high-value pharmaceuticals and other supplies that can get stolen, lost or misplaced. A properly designed RFID system can help better track goods from major suppliers, as well as reduce costs and shrinkage.

Any of these systems can deliver a return on investment. But if hospitals take an infrastructure approach to RFID, they can build a platform enabling them to use the same technology across all of these applications, dramatically improving their ROI. The best way to build an infrastructure is to use standardized technology and plan ahead. Consider how the same readers might be employed to track both medical devices and larger assets, for instance, even if you initially only plan to tag assets.

Our first RFID in Health Care event, being held in Las Vegas on Jan. 23 in conjunction with the Healthcare Supply Chain Management Summit, gives health-care providers the opportunity to learn from hospitals that have already deployed RFID systems and are getting hard benefits in each area described above. 2008 really should be the year RFID helps make health care more efficient and affordable.

Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below.



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