STUDENT LIFE

21st century nurse training

With hospitals increasingly using electronic systems to record patient information, nursing education is beginning to adapt

By Alison Moore

Many hospitals have switched to recording observations electronically over the past few years, often using programmes that allow them to identify deteriorating patients quickly and prompt interventions.

The majority of nursing students will first encounter electronic observations when they are on clinical placement, or even when they start their first job.

Having been trained at university to record on paper charts, they may not be familiar with the equipment. But, as the NHS gradually goes paperless, training is starting to change.

The University of Manchester’s school of nursing, midwifery and social work is the first in the country to teach students to use an electronic system within weeks of starting.

Using a special version of Patientrack, students record information onto iPads. This can also be used in simulation exercises, where ‘observations’ deteriorate over the day.

Mobile updates

Patientrack is one of several systems hospitals are adopting. Designed to be mobile, it allows nurses to input information at the bedside, rather than having to return to the nurses’ station.

An early warning score is then calculated using the data provided, which helps the nurse to spot deteriorations in a patient’s condition and initiate action if necessary.

Most systems can be learned relatively quickly – the basic functions can often be mastered within half an hour.

Former emergency department matron Carol Wilde, now clinical skills tutor at the school of nursing, says: ‘Learning how to carry out patient observations and recording accurate vital signs is the bread and butter of nursing.

Paperless NHS

‘As the NHS becomes paperless, we need to give students a real feel for the systems they will use,’ she says.

‘Allowing first-year students to learn how to carry out patient observations digitally through classroom simulation is an important step in updating nursing teaching.’

Student Emily Heggie says: ‘The early introduction to Patientrack was something I valued hugely once out on placement. I was able to recognise the software and easily input details when asked.’

Fellow student Ruth Bayley, who has just completed her first hospital placement, says: ‘The system helped me to understand physiological observations better and allowed me to develop my nursing skills when interpreting patients’ health, noticing any signs of deterioration in a patient’s observations faster.’

Alison Moore is a freelance journalist