An app developed by a private firm and customised by a hospital trust has been helping senior nurses carry out ward inspections.

The trust’s search for a new way of carrying out inspections began a year ago. Andrew Mooraby, head of nursing at Barnsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, South Yorkshire, was asked to review performance assessments after a Care Quality Commission inspection report in January 2016 stated there was a need for improvement.

Mr Mooraby says: ‘Our nursing metrics were providing us with false reassurance. We were getting high scores but, when we visited the wards and looked, we found the scores were not robust.’

Trusts have to make critical judgements on whether apps are appropriate for NHS use, although the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and partners are developing an assessment tool for apps used in health and social care, a move supported by the Royal College of Nursing.

At Barnsley, it was decided to try using the Perfect Ward app after seeing a demonstration by its developers. Initially, the app included 30 questions, but staff at Barnsley in consultation with senior nurses customised it to include 170 questions appropriate to different areas. By scanning a barcode outside the ward, staff can prime the app to load questions specific to that ward audit.

Specific tools
‘One of the weaknesses of our previous audit was that, when it came to maternity wards, outpatients, theatres or paediatric wards, the comeback was always: “These tools are not specific to us”’, Mr Mooraby says.

‘With the app we said: “Tell us what you want to be in your questionnaire to make it specific”. Now we can use the same tool to audit outpatients, theatres, maternity or paediatrics as well as our general wards.’

‘Everybody liked the platform instantly,’ Mr Mooraby continues. ‘Instead of having to fill in a piece of paper and go to a computer to upload the results, the app made ward assessments much easier and quicker.

Mr Mooraby has found that staff are often reticent to engage with new IT. ‘We’ve seen a lot of technology solutions in the NHS that have been poor, so any advancement comes with a bit of reservation,’ he explains.

‘But as soon as people used the app they saw it saved them time and produced meaningful information. It generates reports that ward teams are actually interested in. A report made up of graphs and spreadsheets is not that engaging for nurses.’

The app’s questions cover a broad spectrum of assessment parameters. For example, they concern whether controlled-drugs books are checked regularly, resuscitation trolleys have been checked, ward environments are clean and tidy, and basic records have been kept.
Fast facts

165,000

Number of health apps available for download

2012

Year that NHS Choices launched a health apps library. It was withdrawn in 2015, but there are plans to relaunch it this year with an innovation and technology tariff

Once the questions have been answered, a report with the relevant ward’s overall score is produced. Wards scoring under 70% are audited again by a matron, while staff on those scoring under 80% have to produce action plans. Wards scoring more than 90% in three consecutive audits must also be reinspected by a matron.

Lead nurse Katie Ashton explains the initial audit process. ‘We complete peer audits,’ she says. ‘I am the lead nurse in respiratory but I completed an audit on the surgical assessment unit.

‘Otherwise, you could be biased or you could make the improvements and then say the actions were already in place.’

The app is easy to use, says Ms Ashton. ‘Outside every ward, there is a little barcode. Using the barcode scanner on the app takes you to the questions for that department’s audit.

‘The app tells you which bits you have failed. We can action solutions on a month-by-month basis. So, if things are coming up month after month, we focus on them.’

Motivation

Ms Ashton thinks the app motivates staff to improve. ‘It sparked a little bit of... not competition, that would be the wrong word, but you do have a look.

‘I work opposite cardiology, so I’ll see what they have scored that month. That drives me on a little bit. I want to win.’

Tracy Chalkley, a matron at the trust, explains how re-audits ensure that the lead nurse does not become overfamiliar with a specific audit or prone to favouritism.

‘Straight away you see issues to relay to your lead nurse. Before Perfect Ward you were acting on things that were four or six weeks out of date.’

Mr Mooraby adds that the evidence produced is hard to refute. ‘You can take photographs and write comments. If you are assessing whether commodes are clean and find they are not, that’s a powerful image to send to a ward sister. An x in a box on spreadsheet report does not have the same impact.’

Perfect Ward is available through the government’s digital marketplace. Further information is available at tinyurl.com/gmy87ej

Barnsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust head of nursing Andrew Mooraby, and lead nurse Katie Ashton and Caroline Kaye, using the Perfect Ward app