

The Value of Open Source an NHS Perspective

The value of using an Open Source approach for software and applications can be seen no more clearly than in the case of the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM). SLaM provides the widest range of NHS mental health services in the UK.

Its Chief information Officer, Stephen Docherty, is proud of its status as Global Digital Exemplar (GDE) – an internationally recognised NHS provider delivering exceptional, efficient care through the use of world-class digital technology and information.



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The project – Open-eObs

One of the objectives of being a GDE is to implement electronic patient observations and the trust has been developing a tool using the Open Source approach rather than proprietary software.

The Open Source electronic observation system known as Open-eObs allows clinicians to record observations of in-patients at their bedsides using hand-held devices. The system then calculates a score which is used to identify and respond to patients that may be at risk of deteriorating. If those scores hit a threshold for escalation, an alert is sent to clinicians.

The proven value of Open Source

Stephen Docherty, CIO, said: “Open Source has allowed us to develop something that meets our exact needs and can be continuously evolved. Our pilot wards contributed to the early development of the system from day one, feeding back through user acceptance testing. If we had purchased something off the shelf we would not have had the flexibility of design and the licence cost plus additional development costs would have far exceeded those of the current solution.”

In addition, because it is Open Source, further developments to the system can be made by other health providers and developers which SLaM can then benefit from.

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Stephen explained: “Open-eObs will continue to evolve. We would expect other trusts to pick up this application, and because the licence encourages that the software is shared and developed, people can adopt the platform and add to the features as required. The licence allows other trusts to contribute, while Apperta’s custodian model ensures the software is secure, stable and compliant with NHS policies.”

Easy switching between suppliers

An unforeseen benefit for the trust, was the flexibility Open Source offered when it came to selecting who would develop new functionality. SLAM require deeper integration, improved resilience and are adopting the NEWS2 observation standard. The project evolved between 2015 (when the project began) and March 2017, and it became clear a new supplier was required to lead this development.

Stephen explained: “We raised this with Apperta and asked who they could recommend to take Open-eObs forward and they linked us to OpusVL. That’s one

of the great benefits of Open Source. If things aren’t working, you can switch suppliers more easily. I believe we will see more of this type of approach in the NHS as we change the model, moving away from monolithic suppliers who rule in a seller’s market today.”

And the handover couldn’t be simpler either. “We could access all the coding and relevant documentation through GitHub, a shared code repository. The previous supplier handed everything over to the trust who were then able to hand over to OpusVL.”

Culture and empowerment

Above all else, SLAM has found that Open Source has created a new culture at the trust.

Stephen said: “You start to implement a different culture in your organisation around the ability to create something new. Being involved and engaged from the very beginning, staff feel empowered and part of the digital change. It’s all part of the journey.”



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