

Soft Factors for Hard Decisions

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1. Introduction

Through a variety of programmes, the Department of Health has worked with David Hitchcock Limited to provide an ergonomics approach to the evaluation of working prototypes of healthcare products and equipment intended to improve infection control and patient dignity, including:

- Bedside furniture
- Bowel management systems
- Commode
- On-ward bed and wash pods
- Temporary side rooms
- Wheelchair

2. Aims of the Work

This work had five main aims:

1. Provide evidence of the way in which the products are used to ensure that potential abandonment issues can be avoided (there is a history of “good” products and equipment which fail when put into practice).
2. Demonstrate the benefits of the new products (both as standalone evaluation and in comparison with existing equivalent equipment).
3. Identify implementation issues which can be addressed by new Trusts’ take-up.
4. Complete the design cycle by the use of a formal monitoring phase.
5. Provide indirect psychosocial benefits through staff engagement.

3. Approach to the Work

In each case, a three-pronged approach to the gathering of what were termed the ‘soft factors’ such as usability, perceived cleanliness, dignity, privacy, sense of isolation and suitability for confused patients was adopted.

- **Observation of the equipment in use** through visiting the wards on which the equipment was implemented.
- **Staff, patient and visitor feedback** regarding the use and suitability of the equipment through on-site discussion and a questionnaire-based survey.

- **Expert ergonomics appraisal** of the equipment considering the issues raised through the observation and feedback elements.

4. Department of Health View

The Department of Health considered that a comprehensive evaluation of working prototypes being used in-situ on NHS hospital wards; enabled feedback to be collected from a wide range of users, triangulated user perceptions with independent observations and captured areas for product improvement.

Evidence based primarily about the user-centred issues enabled hard decisions to be made about suitability for introducing the products into hospitals or helping the designers to understand where to focus on improvements.

A full paper detailing the methodology, findings and manufacturer responses is planned.