

LRS wins big with Southern Health

Australian e-health provider LRS Health recently won a major contract to provide its pathology management system to Victoria's Southern Health service. It's a big win for a local company that is intent on expanding further, as Kate McDonald reports.

LRS Health has flown somewhat under the radar since it began initial work on its MediPATH system back in 1988. But with over 3500 medical practices using its AllTalk electronic messaging system, over 25 sites using other e-health solutions and now a large contract with Southern Health for pathology management, it is starting to make itself a little more widely known.

The contract with Southern Health will see the Melbourne-based company install its MediPATH pathology management system to the health service, which has over 40 sites, including five major hospitals, and serves 32 per cent of metropolitan Melbourne's population. The new system will process the estimated 1.5 million pathology tests run each year, ranging from blood and urine analysis to genetic testing.

And Southern Health hasn't exactly made it easy for the company, as it tends to manage its pathology specimens much more tightly than other organisations LRS has worked with, according to the company's founder and CEO, Andrew Edgley.



Andrew Edgley

admits he had zero knowledge of the pathology sector.

"Mike put in all of the industry expertise and we lived in each other's pockets for a while, but we provided him with software that was designed

exactly for a country Australian hospital or private practice," Edgley says.

"It was originally exclusively character based – there was no Windows or anything like it back then – but it really is very similar in general principle to what we are selling now.

"The things that have changed in the 22 years since are that we have continually added features to it to match the local environment, things like connectivity to the doctors, web viewers and new instruments, and a special way to manage the data in public or private practice. But the architecture remains the same.

"At the pathology practice the decryption occurs and is translated into an order, and when the specimen arrives they match it up with the order."

So far so normal, but then the software is able to tell the actual instruments what to do – it validates the test, puts special rules on the result, and then issues the results to the doctor electronically. It also then sends the bill to Medicare, collects the money back from Medicare and issues a balance sheet at the end of the week or the month.

It is quite a comprehensive service for private practice, and while many other systems to do something similar, Edgley says the difference is that his company can provide every feature. "We provide a link from the doctor to the web, the encryption and its transform process, to the imaging software, our own voice management system, our own Medicare online automation system, our own web viewer – and all of that has been developed in-house by our staff."

Tests at the patient's bedside

For the public hospital sector, the process is slightly different. For Southern Health, the new system will allow the doctor to order tests straight from the patient's bedside. The system then takes the specimen and through the automated system, is able to interface with over 50 different laboratory analysers for the results.

"Test results are then returned via LRS Health's secure messaging service, AllTalk, not only to the requesting clinician but also to other parties involved in the patient's care, for example their GP," he says.

It also ensures that correct procedures are followed, both from the requesting clinician and the pathologist's perspective. Using the web viewer, doctors can log in to ensure that all ordered tests have been carried out, and the system will alert the ward manager if the results are available but no one has looked at them yet.

The interfaces with the high-tech equipment being used in path labs these days, particularly genetic analysers, are also part of the package. Edgley admits that 25 per cent of his business is managing these instrument interfaces, but that is true of all software providers.

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"They put a label on each specimen to represent what sort of specimen it is, which is unusual," Edgley says. "Usually the lab just adds an extra letter to the specimen, but at Southern Health every tube is identified individually and then is tracked throughout the whole laboratory and through the instruments.

"That has been a real challenge and I suspect it is one of the reasons that we got the contract. We were prepared to make those changes to our core software to ensure it works well in their environment."

Edgley began developing the software back in 1988, when he was asked by a friend, Mike Ralston, who owned a pathology lab in Gippsland to help him introduce pathology-specific software. At the time, Edgley was developing billing and inventory management for veterinary companies and

"A significant addition to Medipath has been the introduction of our communications product, AllTalk."

So what exactly does it do? Most things, it seems. According to Edgley, the software works slightly differently depending on whether a GP is using it to liaise with a private pathology provider, or whether a hospital is using it, either internally or externally. What it does best, however, is to link everything up.

"If a doctor wants to do an order in private practice, they just type into their practice management software the pathology tests required, and the software will then automate the request from his desktop through an encryption process that we provide, and then through an internet service to the pathology practice of their choice.

“Each instrument has published methods and I think we have close to 200 unique interfaced structures in the UK and Australia, but each year they bring in new instruments with new interface requirements.”

The explosion in genetic testing will only exacerbate this problem, but LRS Health has got in early and produces its own hepatitis B scan, which is able to look for known

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mutations associated with drug resistance and will automatically report to the clinician if the patient is showing resistance to a certain drug.

This product is called SeqHepB, and the company is about to develop a similar product for hepatitis C. It has an HIV product but Stanford University in the US, with which the clients of LRS have relationships, publishes updated genetic information on HIV every year at a very low price, so LRS has developed

a web interface that automatically links its data with Stanford’s.

The company also has a radiology management system called MediRAD; a specialist health debtors’ management suite called MediBILL, which includes Medicare claims, HICOnline, private health fund and TAC on-line automated claiming and receipting; and AutoSCAN, which provides electronic pathology and radiology document scanning and storage. All have been designed to suit the Australian system, with customised interfaces for Medicare, VET Affairs and the like.

This is one reason why Edgley believes his product was chosen over some pretty big competitors, like GE and Cerna.

“We spend a significant part of our lives engineering changes to software that previously was running beautifully,” Edgley jokes. “We have to maintain that while making it run differently, which is a huge challenge, and that is something that the others don’t really want to do. If you’ve got private clients throughout the world running software, it is more difficult to make ad hoc changes for individual clients. This is always an advantage for a small company like ours. We are prepared to make changes and do things most are not.”



John Edgley

The company might not be too small for too long, however. Along with the Southern Health contract, LRS has solutions installed at the Royal Prince Alfred in Sydney, which uses the company’s

billing system; St Vincent’s hospitals in Sydney and Melbourne; the North Coast Area Health Service in NSW which uses MediBILL; and St John of God Pathology.

And there are expansion plans. Andrew Edgley’s son John, the company’s managing director, says in the last 12 months four new clients have been added, including Southern Health. LRS has had business in the UK for 15+ years, but the priority is firmly on expansion in Australia, he says.

“There is a lot of change going on at the moment in the Australian market,” John Edgley says. “A lot of our competitors are leaving the market so it is clearly an opportunity for us to deliver the same service to them that we do to our existing customers. In the last year we have doubled in size and we will continue to grow.” **HA**

INNOVATION – merlon IP7000-patient communication system

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Peer to Peer Network

Going to the dynamic nature of IP, the IP-7000 Series is not centrally defined as servers, users or user controllers. Should a fault arise in any part of the system (e.g. The Nurse Station PC), it would not affect the operation of the entire Patient Communication System.

Easy to Use Software

merlon's comprehensive software, merlonASSET, provides cutting-edge management of every aspect of the IP-7000 Series. Features include an easily customisable menu layout, with groups and assignable points, to allow for easy load 'testing' and configuration changes. Domestic ready, plus the ability to specify an administrator, Nurse Station PC or Pager to each individual end point.

RFID – Patient Location

Keeping track of patients has become a streamlined process with the introduction of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID). Each UR patient tag is embedded with an RFID chip which allows the patient to be 'logged in' to a bed via an RFID reader either as a Wi-Fi phone, PDA or at the bed head. RFID patient identification will also prevent wrong area when collecting patient specimens and delivering pharmaceutical supplies.

Infection Control – Call points

merlon's new wall points are better than ever. Enhanced ecology provides a single level that enables for ease of cleaning, and increased effectiveness in the control of infection transmission. The highly visible emergency lights are visible and provide reassurance in all light situations. Additionally pleasing in appearance, the wall points are fully functional and suitable for wall or panel mounting.

Bed Status Monitoring

In large facilities, it is hard to keep track of the status of beds, whether they are clean or if they are occupied by a patient. merlon IP-7000 allows staff to monitor the status of each bed via a central point that 'talks' with the nurse station PC to provide real-time occupancy information.

Self Diagnosis

merlon's IP-7000 is an intelligent system which automatically monitors all points for faults. Should a fault arise, the system can be set to contact multiple personnel through various means of communication including DECT, GSM, WiFi, paging, email or the nursecenter system.

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