Southport & Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust oversees two hospitals, the Southport and Formby District General Hospital and Ormskirk and District General Hospital, providing care and community services for a community of more than 250,000 across Southport, Formby and West Lancashire.

Trust decontamination manager Robbie Cormie is responsible for the decontamination and sterilisation of all medical devices across the Trust. His duties include managing the sterile services department and the medical equipment library, while the Trust also provides sterilisation for several GPs and private clients.

Across the Trust, around 700 different instrument set types – with up to 70 of each set – are in use, which means the legislative requirement for all equipment to be marked represents a significant logistical challenge.

Different organisations respond to the legislative requirements in different ways. Some mark their own equipment but Southport & Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust uses GS1 UK accredited industry partner Meditrax to apply, via laser etching, the unique identification marks. Meditrax can mark instruments ranging in size, from those used during eye surgery using a tag that is almost impossible to see with the naked eye, to large hospital equipment such as scanners.

**Driving operational benefits**

Tagging or marking gives each product a unique, Trust-specific identification number which is held on a database. By linking the tags to a Meditrax tracking system it is possible to capture a huge amount of data including the time and date the instrument was used, when it was washed and where it was moved to – all of which is essential if there is a need to identify, or even recall, instruments in the future.

One of the chief benefits is effective asset management, as the Trust has a reliable inventory which in turn allows it to control and optimise its stock. With an accurate understanding of the number of instruments the Trust has, it can determine whether there are too many or too few instruments of a particular kind and whether they are the latest product or need upgrading.

“Imagine taking 200 identical jigsaw puzzles, each with 5,000 pieces, and throwing them up in the air and then trying to find out which piece belongs to which set. It’s pretty much impossible, and that’s the task we would have without the information captured through tagging and tracking medical instruments.”

Robbie Cormie
Trust Decontamination Manager
Southport & Ormskirk NHS Trust
It has also proved effective in stopping instruments going missing – thereby lowering costs of replacements.

Cormie explains: “When people can’t find their instruments in their department, the first reaction is often to ring us up and blame the sterile services department. By checking our records we can see that everything was scanned, washed and returned in sterile packets to their department. That means we can just say ‘No, we haven’t lost your instruments and this is where they are’. It makes life hassle-free and means we are not wasting time trying to track down something we don’t have.”

**Driving clinical benefits**

As well as increasing efficiency within the Trust, there are also very real clinical benefits through tagging, marking and tracking. Some of the more common medical instruments at the Trust can number, at any one time, in their hundreds – dental staff, for example, may have as many as 1,000 dental mirrors.

“With laser etching we can easily identify an individual instrument and when and where it has been used. Why is this important? It means that if a patient comes back later in life with an infection, we can prove that the instruments used on them were sterile.”

Tagging or marking each instrument means it is possible to determine what product was used when, and on which patient. This knowledge can be essential for an effective decontamination process.

“It is also important if there is a need to recall instruments. Some diseases, such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, may develop years after the patient visited hospital and can be impossible to detect and diagnose at the time. With laser etching you can say with certainty which equipment set was used. That would be impossible if we didn’t have unique identification right down to instrument level.”

**Improving patient safety and care delivery**

Ten years ago the Department of Health recommended that NHS hospitals code their surgical instruments and trays using the GS1 System of standards. These recommendations have clearly had a big impact on Southport & Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust.

Hugely positive about the operation and clinical benefits of tagging and tracking, Cormie says that in a modern NHS Trust his job would be next to impossible without the accurate data that tagging provides.