



# JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

**Simon Wilson** *considers the digital evolution of access control in healthcare*

**S**ecurity is paramount in the healthcare sector, and the safety and wellbeing of patients, staff and visitors is critical. However, the complex nature of these environments can present unique challenges, with disparate areas such as emergency wards, operating theatres, utility areas and IT hubs requiring varied levels of security and access control. In a sector where both safety and efficiency are critical, healthcare estates must carefully balance secure, controlled access with the need to maintain smooth operations and high standards of care.

Hospitals and healthcare facilities operate around the clock, with staff, patients, contractors, emergency responders and visitors flowing in and out of doors at all times of the day. Managing this dynamic access

landscape is logistically challenging, but it's also imperative from a security perspective.

Healthcare environments also contain a number of sensitive spaces, including data centres housing confidential patient records, pharmacies storing controlled substances, utility rooms with access to electrical or gas supplies and laboratories with hazardous materials. Unauthorised access can lead to theft, injury or service disruption.

In recent years, there have been multiple high-profile breaches involving the theft of medical equipment and patient data. NHS England, for example, has reported cyber criminals targeting its records systems, while other trusts have dealt with physical security lapses, like the case of a hospital worker jailed for stealing over £100,000 worth of medical equipment for resale.

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Alarming, internal risks are just as prevalent as external threats. The NHS recorded over 35,000 incidents of sexual assault, harassment and abusive behaviour in hospitals over a five-year period underscoring the urgent need to protect vulnerable patients and staff.

Despite these challenges, many healthcare estates still rely on mechanical key systems to manage access. While familiar and relatively inexpensive in the short term, these systems are becoming increasingly unfit for purpose and unable to meet evolving security threats.

Keys can be easily lost, stolen or copied, particularly in settings with high staff turnover. Passing physical mechanical keys between teams is inefficient and difficult to audit, and replacing locks is both costly and disruptive. For facilities management teams, tracking who has access to which areas at which times becomes both time-consuming and open to risk.

Traditional systems also struggle to adapt to the flexible nature of modern healthcare operations. Shift work, temporary contractors and emergency response teams all require timely access to specific areas, often at unsociable hours, so mechanical keys offer little agility in managing such complexity.

To address these limitations, many estates teams are turning to digital access control systems that combine physical security with electronic intelligence. These systems allow access rights to be assigned based on job roles, time schedules and training credentials. Crucially, they also provide detailed audit trails, so estates managers can see exactly who accessed what, when.

For example, a contractor attending site to service a water system can be given access to that specific area for a defined window of time. Once the job is complete, or if a key is lost, the digital access can be revoked instantly, without the need to physically change locks. This not only strengthens security, but reduces downtime and administration.

Beyond operational benefits, intelligent access control also supports legal compliance. In the UK, healthcare facilities are required to meet stringent safety regulations, including the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002 and the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Secure, auditable access to sensitive areas such as isolation wards, chemical stores, and emergency exits is key to fulfilling these obligations.

Effective access control is not just about keeping people out, it's also about enabling safe, timely access when needed. In emergencies, delays caused by searching for keys or finding the right person with access rights can have life-threatening consequences. Digital systems offer rapid, controlled access for designated personnel, helping to ensure emergency protocols are followed without unnecessary obstruction.

Accountability is another major advantage. With every key usage logged electronically, estates teams can quickly identify patterns, investigate incidents and demonstrate compliance. This transparency is particularly valuable during audits or inspections and supports a culture of safety and responsibility.

Sustainability is a growing priority across the public sector and healthcare estates are no exception. Facilities teams are under pressure to reduce energy consumption, emissions, and waste, all while

maintaining safe and efficient operations. While access control might not be the most obvious area for emissions savings, smarter systems can play a meaningful role. For example, replacing mechanical key handovers with digital credentials – such as programmable key cards or mobile access – reduces the need for travel, manual processing and physical replacements. Some solutions come with Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs), helping estates quantify their impact and contribute to sustainability targets.

## ACCESS CONTROL IS NO LONGER JUST A MATTER OF IMPLEMENTING PHYSICAL LOCKS AND KEYS

Raigmore Hospital is a health centre in Inverness, Scotland. It serves patients from the surrounding area and provides specialist services to patients from all over the Highland area. Abloy UK supplied NHS Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, with the eCLIQ electromechanical solution to improve their on-site facilities management and security.

NHS Raigmore provides an extensive range of healthcare services – surgical, medical, clinical support – and with eight floors, over 2,800 staff and over 450 beds, the hospital is very busy every day. It is the only District General Hospital in the NHS Highlands Partnership, which owns over 200 sites throughout their Health Board area.

The sheer size of the hospital estate requires a large facilities management team to oversee building maintenance and environmental services. Plant rooms, high and low voltage rooms and roof hatches are accessed daily to maintain the building – along with a helipad that needs securing and opening when air ambulances need to land.

Previously secured with a system of traditional mechanical keys and cylinders, Raigmore Hospital was susceptible to security risks in cases of lost and stolen keys. An additional consideration in finding the best solution is legislation that now requires hospital buildings to have connected assets.

NHS Raigmore approached Abloy UK to discuss a key management solution that would meet the latest regulations, has the capability to monitor the use of keys and can easily revoke access from lost or stolen keys.

Abloy UK recommended eCLIQ, a web-based locking and key management solution. The system was installed throughout the estate, with 82 locks fitted by Raigmore's facilities management team and 42 keys issued to staff and contractors. Installation was easy as the cylinders do not require a power output. eCLIQ uses web management software providing valuable insights into when, where and by who the keys are used.

Facilities management have a detailed overview and control of access across the hospital as the system logs the time and user of the key every time it's used. If problems occur, it is easy to determine who last entered the room to find out more information in a substantially reduced time.

The risk of unauthorised access is reduced with web management software controlling the validation and revoking of keys. Likewise, former employees who do not return their key will no longer have access because their key can simply be removed from the system.

## THERE HAVE BEEN MULTIPLE BREACHES INVOLVING THE THEFT OF EQUIPMENT AND DATA

eCLIQ provides life-saving operational benefits during air emergencies, as staff no longer need to locate the helipad key to access the pad. All authorised personnel can use their specific key to unlock the pad, which can prove vital when time is a factor in giving a patient life-saving care.

Colin McEwan, Design Lead, Estate Management, NHS Raigmore said: “New legislation requiring connectivity of assets made our old security outdated. Rory at Abloy suggested eCLIQ as a solution and the mechanical locks combined with the benefits that connectivity offers have proved a great asset to the hospital. Previously, when a key gets lost or stolen, the only way to ensure security was maintained was to change our cylinders.

“eCLIQ has negated this, saving us money and time. We have set access to coincide with staff

shift-patterns and any attempted access out of these times is revoked. The system has made it far easier to see who is accessing rooms, proving essential to the hospital’s security. We found the cylinders easy to install, and the support provided by Abloy has helped us transition smoothly to this electromechanical system.”

As healthcare systems evolve to meet new challenges, whether public health crises, cyber threats or sustainability goals, the technologies underpinning estate security must evolve too. The future of access control lies in greater integration and intelligence.

Emerging trends such as biometric verification, mobile access apps and AI-powered monitoring promise even more granular control and predictive capability. Integrated platforms can help estates bring access control into wider security ecosystems, linking with CCTV, fire detection and building management systems.

Yet even as technology advances, the core principles remain and security must be flexible, auditable, and user-friendly. Healthcare environments are built around people and access systems should empower staff to do their jobs safely and effectively, not hinder them.

Access control is no longer just a matter of physical locks and keys, it’s a strategic decision that shapes safety, compliance, efficiency and patient outcomes. With increasing regulatory demands and security threats, digital solutions offer a way to gain control without compromising agility ●

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