“All gone...There are no more queues at the registration counter!” Dr Nishan Siriwardena announces with a flourish of his hands and a warm smile. “A hospital procedure that took almost 45 minutes and resulted in patients waiting in long queues is now over in less than 45 seconds,” he says.

At Sri Lanka’s National Cancer Institute, an iconic hospital in Maharagama, Colombo, the roll-out of modern health information systems is making its mark. The old manual system of recording and storing patient data is being discarded in favour of a new digital platform. Not only is it demonstrating the Institute’s ability to change with the times, but it is also showing the benefits eHealth services provide as part of a country’s health information management strategy.

As our hospital systems go online, electronic Indoor Morbidity and Mortality Reporting software gives the doctors speedy information and accurate data,” says Dr Nishan, who has spearheaded the digitization process at the Institute. According to Dr Nishan, the system – which collects and stores patient data – mitigates unnecessary hassles and makes accessing treatment easier. “When patients from rural areas come for their treatment, they no longer have to physically carry their records. Often they don’t remember their registration number or details about the tests they have undergone. Patients can now be identified and their online records made available to the concerned doctor,” he says.
As the digitization of the Institute goes from strength to strength, countrywide efforts are moving ahead. At present, more than 190 national, provincial and district hospitals across Sri Lanka have installed eHealth software and are implementing digital service delivery. By the end of 2016 the Ministry of Health hopes to have every individual accessing health care services assigned a unique Personal Health Number, allowing the entire country to be covered by the digital system by 2017.

The creation of ‘smart hospitals’ has long been advocated by WHO, who provided technical support to the endeavour. Dr Thushara Ranasinghe, WHO National Program Officer – Planning and Management, says WHO’s support has helped to create the conditions necessary to achieve the targets. “In Sri Lanka today the contours of a new culture of information are visible,” he says, adding, “It augurs well for the health sector where the value and utility of information, in achieving operational and strategic success, is recognized.”

Dr Champika Wickramasinghe, Director of Health Information at the Ministry of Health in Colombo, says along with the successes, some hurdles must be overcome. “Putting the IT system together in Sri Lanka is a huge challenge,” she says, explaining that software developers and coders are in short supply, while computer hardware engineers and networking experts are doing their best to synergise the IT demands of different stakeholders. “But we are confident we will measure up to the challenges,” she affirms, noting that capacity-building and training programmes are underway.

Once completed, the system will not only ease patient access to services, but will also enhance the ability of policymakers to better calibrate public health decision-making. Dr Jacob Kumaresan, WHO Representative to Sri Lanka, says that high quality data is the backbone of good public health policy. “As a result of the eHealth initiative Sri Lanka’s public health data will be more robust and easier to analyse, meaning that policymakers can tailor the health system better to the needs of patients,” he says. “Soon the oldest and most iconic hospitals of the country will be the ‘smart hospitals’ of the 21st century.”