Hospital security has become as sophisticated an undertaking as the medical processes that it is there to protect. The days of having a few security guards to just watch over things are long gone. This change is driven by the complex nature of providing security to an institution that must remain easily accessible to the public, yet which also faces a wide range of security risks.

Today’s hospital security professionals have responded to this challenge with detailed analysis, team building with hospital staff, and harnessing specialized technology.

Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland, California, exemplifies this new approach to hospital security. As a large urban hospital offering a wide range of in-patient and out-patient services, it must be ready to deal with multiple and always evolving security risks.

Richard Sanders, Security Manager for the Alta Bates group of hospitals, and his colleagues take a multi-pronged approach to security, in which the patient security products of Stanley Healthcare Solutions have an important, and in some ways surprising, role.

One of the main challenges of hospital security is that risks vary greatly across different departments, and even between individual patients. That means a “one size fits all” approach simply will not work: either resources are wasted where they’re not needed or they are not available where they are needed.

Some of the tools that Alta Bates uses to understand this variegated risk landscape are quite traditional, including crime statistics and patterns, and demographic data. But these can only do so much to identify the particular risks facing the hospital.

“It’s critical for us to be able to identify our at-risk departments, so that we can target our resources,” says Mr. Sanders.

To understand more precisely the risks in each area of the hospital, Alta Bates relies on hospital staff themselves. Every year, the hospital conducts a survey of staff on how they perceive security in their work environment, asking them to assess risks to patients, visitors and staff. This information often points to new or evolving risks that require new or modified security.

Creating a secure environment is also very much a collective responsibility at Alta Bates. The Security department may have primary responsibility, but every employee must take an active role.

In fact, it is this mindset that is critical to success, says Mr. Sanders. “A big part is educating the staff that they are just as much a part of the security program as the Security Team.”

The hospital is trying to move to a proactive attitude towards security. In the area of infant protection, for example, it still runs mock abduction drills to see how security and medical staff react. This is critical to knowing whether the hospital is ready for the real thing. The hospital uses the Hugs® infant protection system from Stanley Healthcare Solutions’ throughout the two floors of its maternal child care area to help protect the approximately 8000 babies born every year at Alta Bates.
At the same time, however, Mr. Sanders and his staff emphasize active vigilance. “The greatest risk is always the human factor. No matter how good a system is, people always have to be aware of the risk their own behavior could introduce – for example, but letting someone draft behind them into an elevator.”

Security staff will also do on the spot checks to see if hospital workers know security procedures and what they should do in the event of an attempted abduction or other similar situation. It’s all part of encouraging continual engagement by all staff in a safe environment.

The role of technology

And what is the role of technology in the evolving world of hospital security? Naturally, a significant part of its benefit is the traditional “hardening of the target” to reduce the likelihood of someone even attempting a crime.

Certainly, this is one of the key roles of the Hugs system at Alta Bates. Just as important, however, is how the system contributes to a finer understanding of the hospital’s risks. “It’s like a giant highlighter,” says Mr. Sanders. “It really shows you where your risks are, like an emergency exit with a short access point to the street.”

With this information and raised awareness, Mr. Sanders and all the staff of Alta Bates, both security and medical, can focus in on the areas of greatest risk.