

## NHS Pathways and the Directory of Services

### **Introduction**

South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SECAmb) will be using NHS Pathways to triage all 999 calls from April 2011. NHS Pathways is a suite of clinical assessment content, for triaging telephone calls from the public, based on the symptoms they report when they call.

### **Background**

The pressures on ambulance services and A&E departments have been increasing and many of the patients that dial 999 for an ambulance or visit A&E could be treated more appropriately by alternative services (such as minor injuries units, GPs, district nurses, walk in centres, emergency dentists).

Until now urgent and emergency care has been fragmented and disconnected as patients often don't know where they should go when they have an urgent care need that is not life threatening. This has led to inconsistencies in the responses and treatment patients receive for various reasons. These include: preventing easy cross referral, the need to re-triage at each step using different clinical assessment tools, patients being referred to services that do not have the skills they require or patients simply not knowing where and how they can access urgent care and as a result dial 999.

NHS Pathways sets out to deliver a single clinical assessment tool that provides effective triage over the telephone in any setting taking calls from the public. This can include 999, NHS Direct, GP Out of Hours, NHS 111 and any other Single Point of Access number in place.

This will ensure every patient accessing urgent and emergency care services is effectively triaged, reducing the need for them to repeat information and helping to make sure that they are directed to the right care at the right time.

### **How does NHS Pathways work?**

NHS Pathways enables a specially designed clinical assessment to be carried out by the trained person answering the call. Once the clinical assessment has been completed a clinical skill set and a defined timescale will be identified for the patient.

At the end of the assessment, an automatic search is carried out on the integrated web based Directory of Services to locate an appropriate service in the patient's local area that offers the specific clinical skills needed within the time frame required (such as minor injuries units, district nurses, GPs, emergency dentists, pharmacies).

## Key messages

- NHS Pathways can be used in any urgent and emergency care setting taking calls from the public (like 999, NHS 111 and GP Out of Hours).
- Social care contacts can be included in the Directory of Services.
- NHS Pathways supports trained call handlers and nurses to deliver a safe and efficient assessment of an individual patient's presenting symptoms on the telephone.
- NHS Pathways enables the call handler to assess the patient and match them with a service in their local area that can deliver the care they need.
- NHS Pathways supports full clinician use where the call complexity or the organisation operational model requires it.
- NHS Pathways uses an integrated directory of local services (such as minor injuries units, district nurses, urgent care centres, emergency dentists) to find a local service that offers the clinical skills needed. Local services are uploaded into the directory with structured tables populated with the clinical skills offered by each service.
- NHS Pathways supports the call handler to carry out a safe, effective assessment of the symptoms the patient reports. As the clinical assessment progresses each answer determines the next question to be asked and leads to a pre-determined level of care for the patient based on the information provided.
- At the end of the assessment, a unique combination of codes identifies the clinical skills required for definitive care and the time frame within which they should be provided to the patient.
- Up to February 2011 1.9 million calls have been assessed using NHS Pathways. There have been no reports of any adverse incidents caused as a result of the correct use of the NHS Pathways clinical assessment tool.
- NHS Pathways has been evaluated on behalf of the Department of Health by the Universities of Sheffield, Southampton and Swansea. They concluded that the NHS Pathways system was 'safe and appropriate'.
- NHS Pathways facilitates consistent clinical assessment for callers to any single point of access number (SPA), 999, GP Out of Hours service, NHS Direct and NHS 111.

- NHS Pathways has support from the BMA and those Royal Colleges involved in the delivery of urgent and emergency care.
- NHS Pathways is under constant review and direction by the clinical community via the independent National Clinical Governance Group. This group is chaired by the Royal College of General Practitioners and is made up of representatives from those Royal Colleges with an interest in urgent and emergency care, College of Emergency Medicine (CEM), British Medical Association (BMA) and other organisations involved in the delivery of urgent and emergency care.
- Clinical Safety has been a key part of the development process for NHS Pathways. Every clinical question and every piece of care advice is, where possible, linked individually to at least three pieces of evidence, if available (preferably UK if possible) and dated within the last five years where possible.

### **Benefits to Ambulance Trusts**

- NHS Pathways supports 'hear and treat' by enabling referral to primary care on the first point of contact, thus avoiding the need for a separate queue of Category C calls, waiting to be re-triaged by clinicians using a separate system.
- The link to the integrated Directory of Services offers real time information on all the clinical skills available within any given area; each entry on the directory is maintained by the primary or acute care service. This means the Ambulance Trust can see and access up to date data at any given point, without the need to employ staff to gather and maintain an in-house directory. This enables greater integration of the ambulance service in the local health community within which it works.
- There is also evidence that NHS Pathways can offer more appropriate sorting of 999 calls. Independent academic evaluation identified that NHS Pathways offered sorting levels to Category A around 10% lower than the national average.
- The Ambulance Services have more choice over how they answer 999 calls.
- The first pilot at the North East Ambulance Service is currently avoiding approximately 2000 inappropriate ambulance journeys each month, through the use of NHS Pathways and Directory of Services to triage 999 calls.
- Data from the use of NHS Pathways and Directory of Services within the Ambulance Service offers commissioners real time data on the actual services required by a population; providing the ambulance service with evidence to support discussions on performance, operations and funding.

### **Benefits to commissioners**

- NHS Pathways provides commissioners with an option to enable consistent clinical assessment no matter where callers choose to ring. Coupled with the integrated Directory of Services, this ensures all callers are directed to an appropriate level of care as close to home as possible.
- This ensures best use of services, minimises inappropriate use of higher cost services, and allows demand to be moved around the system. At any given point call handlers can, if commissioners choose to use this functionality, see the relative capacity displayed in a simple colour format (Red/Amber/Green) of any given service. If necessary they can refer patients away from those experiencing pressure to those services with capacity as well as the skills to meet the needs of the patient.
- The use of NHS Pathways and its integrated Directory of Services allows generation of data for commissioners on the gaps in their service provision e.g. data on the clinical skills required, by time of day/night, by postcode, and in particular the skills required for which no primary care service was available.
- This will enable commissioners to identify the changes required to commissioned services to maximise use of available resource.
- All primary care services can be added to the Directory of Services and commissioners have the option to choose opening times, clinical skill sets and capacity available at each service.

### **Benefits for patients**

After a comprehensive review the Department of Health licensed NHS Pathways for use in 999 control rooms bringing a number of benefits to patients.

These include:

- More patients go to the right place first time.
- Reduced delay in accessing appropriate care.
- Improved patient experience – less anxious waiting for a call back.
- Reduced re-triage – less need to repeat information to different people on the phone whilst trying to get access to the right care.

***For callers who ring an urgent care line, not 999, NHS Pathways offers the ability to dispatch ambulances for the very ill in no more time than if they had called 999 directly – no delay and no re-triage.***

## **System benefits**

NHS Pathways is a suite of clinical assessment content, for triaging telephone calls from the public, based on the symptoms they report when they call. Structured symptom based flows determine the clinical skills required, and the timeframe in which they must be accessed.

In summary:

- The ability to redirect callers to an appropriate primary care service when they call 999. (Currently avoiding 2000 inappropriate ambulance journeys a month in the North East).
- As an assessment progresses, the system collects 'markers' that identify if a particular clinical skill will be required to treat the patient. These markers map seamlessly against a record of clinical skills in primary care services local to the patient using the integrated Directory of Services, enabling the call handler to offer the caller details of a service local to the patient, open and with capacity to provide the clinical skills needed.
- Commissioners can receive detailed data showing actual clinical skills needed in the area, by time of day and postcode.
- NHS Pathways offers the NHS the means to achieve the ultimate strategic aim of national clinical assessment and referral to a specific local service – all on first point of contact.
- NHS Pathways can be integrated with current systems and technology.
- Provides one common clinical assessment.
- Implementing the NHS Pathways system is free for the NHS.

## **For more information**

If you would like to learn more about NHS Pathways and the directory of services, please contact Claire Hobbs [claire.hobbs@surreypct.nhs.uk](mailto:claire.hobbs@surreypct.nhs.uk).

Further information about NHS Pathways can be found at <http://www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/systemsandservices/pathways>