NHS Pathways and Directory of Services

Core Narrative

**Purpose**
The NHS Pathways and the Directory of Services core narrative has been designed to support NHS communications leads and/or project managers in explaining what is changing for patients and healthcare staff.

**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 in primary care.

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 (SPA) 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.

**What is it and how does it work?**
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.

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, if an emergency ambulance is not required, an automatic search is carried out on the integrated 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.

**Key Messages**

**NHS Pathways**

- NHS Pathways can be used in any urgent and emergency care setting taking calls from the public.

- The NHS Pathways clinical assessment tool facilitates consistent clinical assessment for callers to any SPA, 999, GP out-of-hours service, NHS Direct and NHS 111.

- NHS Pathways integrates with a Directory of Services to find a local service that offers the clinical skills needed to treat the patient. Local primary care services are uploaded into the directory with structured tables populated with the clinical skills offered by each service.

- NHS Pathways supports trained call handlers 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.

- There are over 700 symptom pathways within the clinical assessment tool.

**Clinical Safety, Assurance and Governance**

- NHS Pathways has support from the British Medical Association (BMA) and 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 the College of Emergency Medicine (CEM), BMA and other organisations with an interest in and/or involved in the delivery of urgent and emergency care.

- Clinical safety is a key part of the development process for NHS Pathways. Where possible, every clinical question and every piece of care advice is linked individually to at
least three pieces of (preferably UK based) evidence and dated within the last five years. All evidence is graded for quality and with any new change request or alternative suggestion; the clinical authors can compare the evidence and select an approach based on the highest quality evidence available.

- NHS Pathways was also awarded a ministerial licence in February 2009, becoming one of only three systems to be endorsed that can be used to dispatch emergency ambulances.

- The National Audit Office has supported the use of the NHS Pathways software to improve efficiencies in ambulance services in their ‘Transforming Ambulance Services’ report released in June 2011.¹

- 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’.²

**Directory of Services**

- The Directory of Services is a central directory which can be populated by any primary care service. It gives access to real-time information about clinical services in order to locate an available service with the right skills.

- It can be populated with primary and secondary care services including, but not limited to, minor injury units, district nurses, urgent care centres, GPs, walk-in centres and dentists.

- There are numerous Directory of Services’ available; this directory is the only one that fully integrates with NHS Pathways.

- Social care contacts can be included in the Directory of Services. Clinicians can look for these using the Manual Quick Search function.

The Directory of Services works in two ways:

- **By integrating with NHS Pathways** - as the clinical assessment progresses, a unique combination of codes identifies the clinical skills required and the timeframe within which they must be provided to the patient. This forms an electronic search string which returns results of appropriate, available services directly to the screen of the call handle.

- **Manual Clinical Search** - this feature can be performed by a clinician independently of NHS Pathways. For example, if a district nurse is on a home visit and the patient requires
additional care, they can manually search the Directory of Services for a local service to further treat the patient.

The nurse can enter the patient’s age, gender and/or location and select the clinical skills they know the patient requires. This manual search will present all appropriate services available for the patient to access or be referred into.

**Commissioning**

- The combined use of NHS Pathways and the Directory of Services can provide commissioners with information about the demand and supply of health care skills and services in their area. Whilst NHS Pathways provides the clinical assessment, the Directory of Services holds a comprehensive list of available primary care services available that can be used to refer patients into.

- The Directory of Services, which allows the call handler to refer a patient to a service, maintains a record of where the demand is from patients.

- Commissioners can download reports to assess and evaluate which services are being used regularly and where there are further demands.

- The report can be broken down to show which clinical skills were searched for and which services have been accessed and referred into, by time of day and location. This allows a more informed decision to be made about available services, opening hours, clinical skill sets and clinical staff that are required to meet demands.

- The Directory of Services keeps a record of all searches made, providing commissioners with actual demand data on the skills needed, by postcode and time of day. The Directory of Services records also identify excess coverage of specific skills which are available but not utilised. The data also shows which services missed out on a referral and the criteria it didn’t meet, e.g. opening hours, capacity, specific skills only available at certain times of the day and not when required.

- Finally, real-time reporting of this information is possible which can provide up to the minute information for public health use, such as to track outbreaks of infectious disease.

- As a commissioner you can decide which services are made available via the Directory of Services. However, it is only clinically appropriate for certain types of services to be made available directly to NHS Pathways call handlers. Other services which are available for direct clinician search can be added with local agreement.
Training

- Any call handler using NHS Pathways to answer calls undertakes a 60 hour training programme which includes a pre-course learning pack which provides an introduction to the system and key areas of anatomy, physiology and medical terminology, classroom tuition, written and practical assessments which must achieve a pass mark of 70%.

- Additionally, all call handlers receive a minimum of four weeks of supervised use on the live system followed by another assessment. This includes a clinical audit of calls taken and direct feedback to the individual.

- This is in addition to any training provided by the organisation on use of telephony, call control and local processes and procedures for call referral under different circumstances, such as child protection, vulnerable adult, frequent caller or patient with special notes.

Key progress

- NHS Pathways and the Directory of Services is the clinical technology currently underpinning the NHS 111 sites as per the coalition policy on single point of access to urgent care.

- Up to end of June 2013, over 8 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.

- Most of England is now live with NHS 111 and using NHS Pathways and the Directory of Services.

Additional information

For further information about NHS Pathways and the Directory of Services please visit http://systems.hscic.gov.uk/pathways

If you have an enquiry and would like to speak to someone in the programme team please email nhspathwayscms@hscic.gov.uk
References