

NHS Safety Thermometer data collection and publication – classification as management information

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Overview

NHS Digital currently collects and publishes data regarding the NHS Safety Thermometer on behalf of NHS Improvement. NHS Safety Thermometer publications can be found on the NHS Digital Website:

<http://content.digital.nhs.uk/searchcatalogue?q=NHS+safety+thermometer&area=&size=10&sort=Relevance>.

There is a plan for NHS Digital to hand over collection and release of Safety Thermometer information to NHS Improvement. On detailed review, we think that the voluntary nature of the collection and the lack of agreed standards for the collection, make it unsuitable to be an official statistic. The main purpose of the Safety Thermometer is to provide Trusts with their own data and the ability to benchmark broadly with other organisations rather than to obtain aggregate national figures that suffer from this unknown uncertainty. In particular we think that a published PDF document with national aggregates implies a level of consistency with the data which is at odds with the voluntary and non-standards driven nature of the collection. Given this, we are planning to remove the Official Statistics ‘badge’ on remaining publications.

Background to the ST

The NHS Safety Thermometer is a local improvement tool for measuring, monitoring and analysing patient harms and 'harm free' care, developed by the NHS for the NHS. The Safety Thermometer is commissioned by NHS Improvement.

The ‘classic’ NHS Safety Thermometer was developed to collect data on four common harms:

- Pressure ulcers
- Urinary tract infections (UTIs) in patients with catheters
- Venous thrombo-embolism (VTE)
- Falls

The NHS Safety Thermometer is a voluntary collection that should be used for local quality improvement purposes. It is a point of care point prevalence survey tool that allows data to be collected wherever the patient is at the time the data is collected (e.g. home, nursing home, acute care). The tool is intended to enable a ‘temperature check’ of harm and allow monitoring of improvement over time.

Although there are definitions for the data items to be collected, caution should be taken when making comparisons between organisations. Its use for regulatory or external management purposes, and in regional dashboards or scorecards, is not recommended.

Different NHS Safety Thermometers

In addition to the original NHS Safety Thermometer, or the 'Classic Safety Thermometer' as it is also called, there are now Safety Thermometers for Medication, Mental Health, Maternity and Children and Young People's Services.

Information on the range of safety thermometers can be found at www.safetythermometer.nhs.uk. Further information and publications of data from the 'Classic' NHS Safety Thermometer can be found at digital.nhs.uk/thermometer.

Removal of the Official Statistics status

It is proposed that Official Statistics status be removed from the NHS Safety Thermometer monthly publications as the collection and publication does not meet all of the criteria to be classed as an Official Statistic.

This is not a reflection on the tool's effectiveness for local improvement. It is intended that removal of the Official Statistics badge will emphasise the intended use of the Safety Thermometer as a local improvement tool.

Guidance on Official Statistics Status

The National Statistician's Guidance: Identifying Official Statistics¹ states that a dataset or quantitative product should be considered a strong candidate for treatment as an 'official statistic' if it meets five criteria of: Collection, Methodology, Coverage, Subject Matter, and Accessibility.

The NHS Safety Thermometer meets the criteria of Collection, Subject Matter and Accessibility.

It does not meet the criteria of Methodology and Coverage.

i) **Collection** – The process of collecting the raw data used to compile the product is conducted on either a regular or recurring basis, or there is an intention or strong probability for that to be the case.

This is met as the NHS Safety Thermometer data is collected on a recurring basis.

ii) **Methodology** - The raw data are collected, and the results are compiled, using widely accepted statistical methods. This equally applies to administrative data even where the statistical methods are straightforward.

This is not met by the NHS Safety Thermometer (NHS ST). The NHS ST is a voluntary collection, so not all eligible organisations submit each month. It is recommended that the NHS ST survey is carried out on a specific day of each month, but data providers are under no obligation to conduct it on this day and many carry it out on a different day or carry out the survey on more than one day during the month and submit all results.² There are also known variations in data collection practices that

¹ www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/ns-reports--reviews-and-guidance/national-statistician-s-guidance/identifying-official-statistics.pdf

² <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/searchcatalogue?q=NHS+safety+thermometer&area=&size=10&sort=Relevance>

mean the accuracy and comparability of the data between settings is reduced. Issues have been raised with the definitions not being clear to those doing the data collection, with locally agreed solutions being found.³

When used as a local improvement tool, with a good understanding of local data collection practices, these concerns are not relevant. As long as a consistent approach is practiced locally, comparability over time within a setting is appropriate. However because of the nature of the data collection, the methods used to aggregate and describe national results are unreliable.

An alternative treatment of the data may go some way to addressing the issue of coverage of providers, but could not alleviate the issues identified with collection practices.

iii) Coverage - The information compiled from the raw data is complete in the sense that it is representative of the total population of entities that it embraces.

This is not met by the NHS ST. As outlined above under Methodology, the collection is voluntary so not every eligible organisation participates each month, so coverage is not universal nor is there any control over the whether the collection is representative or not.

An alternative treatment of the data may go some way to addressing this issue.

iv) Subject Matter - The subject-matter covered by the product includes one or more of the following categories of information:

- used to monitor or measure the government's performance or delivery (either generally, or against formal targets);
- has the potential to impinge substantially on the formulation, implementation, evaluation, or monitoring of public policy;
- has the potential to inform, or impact on, decisions about the management of government services, or the allocation of public funds or resources;
- provides a window on the work of government by, for example, allowing citizens to assess the impact of public policies and actions;
- can serve the 'public good' by meeting the needs of business, academia, etc;
- has had a high public profile in the past (i.e. regularly generated column inches in the print media or regularly attracted the attention of the broadcast media) or is likely to generate significant public interest, and perhaps even controversy, in the future;
- information which is market-sensitive (likely to have a significant effect on the value or traded volume of any investment).

This is met as it is arguable that the NHS ST meets at least bullet points three and four.

v) Accessibility - The information derived from the raw data is placed in the public domain by a producer, a person on their behalf or a third party. It does not matter whether the information is published as a statistical release, as part of an answer to a Parliamentary

³ <http://harmfreecare.org/evaluation/>

Question or Freedom of Information request or as evidence to a Select Committee, it is the characteristics of the information that are paramount.

This is met by the NHS ST. A report is published on a monthly basis alongside the data.

Proposal

It is proposed that the Official Statistics badge be removed for two reasons:

- i. The collection and publication does not meet all of the criteria to be classed as an Official Statistic.
- ii. To emphasise that the NHS Safety Thermometer is a voluntary collection that should be used for local quality improvement purposes only.