

# NHS Direct Wales -a national nurse-led service

Govier I M, Howells G P, Jones S R (2000) NHS Direct Wales -a national nurse-led service. *Nursing Standard* Vol 14 No 48 August 16-22.

**Following the official launch of NHS Direct in Wales, the senior nurse management team provide an overview of NHS Direct Wales and highlight some of the events and challenges in setting-up this national nurse-led service.**

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In February 1999, Alan Michael, the Secretary of State for Wales, announced that NHS Direct, a confidential, nurse-led service providing 24 hour health information and advice would be available to the people of Wales. That announcement became a reality on June 13<sup>th</sup>, when after several months of intensive preparation, the service went 'live'.

Wales, although part of the United Kingdom, is a country in its own right and possesses a unique identity, language and culture with a diverse geography and population. Its rich and colourful history has recently been augmented with the creation of a National Assembly for Wales which has been charged with developing and implementing policies and initiatives which reflect the particular needs of the people of Wales - NHS Direct Wales is one of these initiatives.

As the service has grown from a project to a fully functioning operational unit, certain guiding principles have helped to shape NHS Direct Wales. These include:

- Improving access to health advice and information for the people of Wales
- Promoting the right of the people of Wales to make informed health choices
- Providing a quality bilingual advice and information service
- Valuing and nurturing the nurse team
- Working with health professionals and other agencies in Wales in providing a seamless service

As with any other new health care service or provision, recruitment of staff can be a delicate issue. This is especially so when perceptions exist that the new service will deplete existing scarce resources. Many Directors of Nursing and Senior Nurses throughout Wales commented on the high degree of sensitivity with which the nurse recruitment campaign was conducted and the fact that many of them were consulted before, during and after the recruitment exercise. Only 55% of the nurse team were recruited from within the NHS and even then, they came from 19 different hospitals and community settings in the NHS in England and Wales; nurses were also attracted from existing NHS Direct sites. This recruitment of staff has also created opportunities for movement and

promotion of nurses within the existing Welsh health service where people have moved across to NHS Direct Wales.

NHS Direct in Wales has certainly benefited from the experience of its counterparts in England and the support from English sites has been excellent in terms of strategic and operational planning. Guidelines for 4<sup>th</sup> wave NHS Direct sites in England now recommend 'direct to nurse' access for callers rather than initial details, such as demographic information, being taken by someone other than a registered nurse. NHS Direct Wales employs this model whereby contact with a nurse is made at the outset of the consultation and maintained until termination of the call.

Although multi-lingual access is ensured through services such as *Language Line*, NHS Direct Wales is committed to providing a bilingual service. In certain areas of Wales, Welsh is spoken by approximately 70% of the population with many using it as their primary language. Therefore, a Welsh speaking nurse is available at all times should a caller seek information or advice through the medium of Welsh. Additionally, all NHS Direct Wales information leaflets and documentation, as well as the official website, are bilingual.

Effective nurse education and training has been essential to the success of NHS Direct Wales and the current six week programme has been designed to produce a clinically safe and competent nursing workforce. Additionally, the education and training programme has been developed to reflect the core concepts of clinical governance thus ensuring high standards, greater consistency and reliability in assessment and advice-giving, together with more detailed documentation and audit of the content of the telephone consultation.

It is essential that there is a systematic approach to the telephone consultation process so that advice and information is consistent. NHS Direct Wales utilises a decision-support software system that offers speed and ease of access to information as well as recording the outcome of the consultation. The TAS (Telephone Advice System) software education and training is provided by the Plain Software Company and consists of an intensive 10 day programme during the six weeks using basic and complex scenarios/role plays. Each nurse is assessed for safety and competency at the completion of the course and prior to taking their first 'live' call.

Adjunctive education and training includes several sessions on child, mental and sexual health, pharmacology, public sector and voluntary groups. Many other aspects of health and social care are also represented in the education and training programme. National representatives from the public, private and voluntary sector in Wales contribute so that the nursing team acquire an all-Wales perspective. Our nurse team also receive training and education from

Health Information Wales and play an active part in supporting this service which is now an integral feature of NHS Direct Wales.

Ongoing professional development is being realised by supporting staff through individual performance appraisal, clinical supervision, continuing education and allowing them to apply and adapt their areas of clinical expertise to NHS Direct Wales across the principality. Each member of the nurse team is currently in the process of developing links and establishing information resources across Wales for their particular area of expertise. Associations have already been established with the higher education sector in Wales and a dedicated telephone consultation and triage programme of education is planned for the near future. Research opportunities have also been explored as the service will be in a position to provide and explore data which is both rich in a quantitative and qualitative nature.

In many respects, because the service is new to Wales, the nursing staff have had to develop policies, procedures and protocols to reflect the new clinical environment as well as some of the more distinctive aspects of health care and life in Wales. This has helped reinforce the ethos that the service is nurse-led which is also mirrored in other areas of the service. Two Senior Nurses take the lead on professional development / clinical governance issues and operational matters and the senior nurse managers have the majority voice on the management team. The Clinical Advisory Group that sits to review the service and the advice given, is chaired by the Director of Nursing and consists of nurses as well as doctors, pharmacists, dentists and other co-opted professionals.

NHS Direct Wales has a strong and dynamic nurse leadership that is reflected at all levels of the nursing team and is permeated by an ethos that develops and supports practitioners and practice. Opportunities are planned for members of the nurse team to return to previous or new areas of clinical practice thus ensuring that traditional nursing skills and expertise are not lost, but perhaps more importantly, newly acquired skills are shared with other nursing colleagues.

We realise that it's still very early days here at NHS Direct Wales and the service is in its infancy. However, if the experience of our colleagues in England is anything to go by, then the service will expand and develop far beyond its current remit. We are keen to be at the forefront of the National Assembly for Wales's commitment to support and implement the government's vision and plan to modernise the National Health Service in the United Kingdom.

We believe that NHS Direct Wales will grow and become an established part of health care in Wales. We also aim to be at the forefront of health care provision and are keen to both suggest and embrace many of the initiatives necessary to ensure, that in conjunction with the National Assembly for Wales document *Realising the Potential* (1999), we do not only realise, but also release the full

potential of nurses at NHS Direct Wales in order to meet, in collaboration with others, the present and future health needs of people in Wales.

#### Reference

National Assembly for Wales (1999) *Realising the Potential - a strategic framework for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting in Wales into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff

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