

Healthcare Commission

Have your say on how we can improve local health services

Northgate Information Solutions' response

February 2005

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A citizen-centred approach

1. Northgate warmly welcomes the Healthcare Commission's current consultation and its emphasis on developing assessment around issues which really matter to people.
2. A citizen-centred approach is critical to developing enhanced public services which take account of people's central concerns and include them in the planning and delivery of services.

Using information intelligently

Identifying outliers

3. Relevant, useful and robust information is critical to developing an efficient and effective assessment system.
4. Northgate supports the view that assessment should become less of a burden for those being inspected. We believe that improvements in the current assessment system may be made by: making greater use of existing information by enhancing its utilisation capacity; and by focusing more on assessments of developmental standards that promote continuous improvement.
5. Information technology can assist in the process of providing objective evidence to inform judgements on the quality of health and healthcare being provided. In particular, greater use should be made of the early identification of 'outliers' or unusual data values to enable the assessment system to root out poor performance and improve public health.
6. Once data errors have been omitted, the earlier identification of patterns and trends would help to promote efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of a public health service, and enable the sharing of best practice.
7. Exploring the reasons for outliers will help to develop better healthcare models. Northgate recommends that this should become a regular part of healthcare analysis. Once detected, the assessment system must include a clear development plan for acting upon the identification of outliers in a timely and appropriate fashion.

Earlier access to information

8. Earlier access to outliers would help to prevent scandals such as the Harold Shipman affair. Earlier access to information would also help to rebuild public trust and improve awareness of public health issues and to enhance accountability of health service providers.
9. Northgate recommends that there should be earlier access to information for the public. The information available should also reflect the day to day healthcare experience of the public. Where possible, information should be publicly available on a quarterly basis as part of an annual cycle of review.

Disaggregation of information

10. If the public is to have greater faith that healthcare providers are dealing with the things that matter to them, they need to have access to the information that matters. In our view it is essential that this entails disaggregation of the different components of the framework of assessment in calculating the annual rating and that this information is made publicly available.
11. The public must be able to distinguish between: information governing past and future performance; clinical outcomes and organisational performance.

Building professional trust

12. Within the assessment system, provision should be made for health professionals to be able to have enough confidence to raise concerns about their own performance. Poor performance is rarely deliberate or pre-meditated and may also be a cause of anguish and anxiety to the professional themselves.
13. Health professionals need to know how their performance is assessed through publicly available information. Any assessment must be based on local information and issues facing the professionals in their day to day work.
14. Health professionals will have little faith in such a system if they perceive that the quality of the information collected is poor or fails to take local issues into account. It requires constant refinement of the kinds of information collected to ensure that they are consistent with the development of healthcare and adequately reflect the quality of care delivered.
15. It also requires the ability to pull together information from disparate sources and bodies of statistics to identify adverse patterns and trends. This may indicate patterns of poor performance by predictive analysis, rather than by relying solely on human complaints as a method of discovery.

16. We welcome systems that highlight good practice and promote continuous improvement. An incremental approach to collection, monitoring, auditing and reporting would help to build up a more complete and accurate picture of the reasons behind poor performance and help to prevent it happening in the first place.
17. For further information on issues raised in this response or for further details about Northgate's public policy work please contact Kathy Sutton, 0207 849 3403, or Naomi Stevenson, 0207 849 3508.

About Northgate Information Solutions

Northgate is a technology company with a difference. We are committed to high quality public services. And we understand the public sector. We know how it works, some of its problems and most of its challenges. That knowledge is core to our business.

At Northgate we are sensitive to the internal requirements of our public sector customers, the process of public service delivery and the wider policy agenda surrounding public services. We develop solutions that take all three into account and understand the relationship between them.

Northgate supplies innovative technology solutions to the public sector. Our clear customer focus and collaborative approach helps us to work with a wide range of public services in health, criminal justice and local and central government. Our task is to enhance public sector value through the intelligent use of information technology and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

Northgate helps communities to achieve healthier, cleaner and safer environments by tackling the issues that are most important to local people, from access to high quality healthcare to anti-social behaviour. We believe that citizens should be at the heart of public services and be active participants in the delivery of local solutions.

With over thirty years of experience, Northgate's no-nonsense approach helps our partners meet changing demands with the minimum of fuss. We give public authorities the support to innovate and experiment, developing new responses to long-standing problems and anticipating problems that may arise in the future.

Northgate works with both the Department of Health and the Healthcare Commission. Northgate also works with a number of local health trusts, helping them to review and improve their performance.