

Scottish Executive

Safer for patients, supportive for professionals

A framework for managing poor performance of
health professionals and teams in NHS Scotland

Northgate Information Solutions' response

June 2004

Safer for patients, supportive for professionals

Introduction

1. Northgate warmly welcomes the consultation on developing a framework for managing the poor performance of health professionals. It is essential that performance management of this nature is linked to continuous improvement in healthcare, and that the framework is viewed as part of promoting and encouraging a learning environment within NHS Scotland.
2. This means that there must be clear mechanisms for preventing poor performance through enhanced risk management techniques and for sharing information and learning from incidents.

Current structures and principles of action

3. It is clear from the analysis that current structures within Scotland are not adequately dealing with poor professional performance amongst health professionals, and that change is required to ensure a more holistic approach to this issue.
4. Whilst, in general, we agree with the principles outlined in the document we believe that there are a further number which should be addressed.
5. Firstly, it is essential that strategies are put in place to prevent poor performance from occurring in the first place. Scottish people need to know that the Scottish Executive is doing everything in its power to prevent poor performance through effective risk management strategies.
6. Secondly, we think it is vital that the Scottish Executive adopts a partnership approach which fully involves health professionals working alongside the Scottish Executive and other organisations – be they public or private – in a collaborative fashion.
7. Thirdly, if Scotland is to prevent poor performance and raise standards of healthcare it needs centrally held information and analysis which can enable corrective action to tackle poor performance. Critical to the success of such systems is that there is strong and robust local input and involvement, not only in collecting data but in defining and refining central information and analysis.

8. We agree that a central component of the framework must be a standard reporting system to allow central monitoring and audit of activity in poor performance through the staff governance section of the Performance Assessment Framework (PAF).
9. Fourthly, if health professionals are to have trust and confidence in the system they need to know that the system is open, transparent, accountable and equitable and that its primary function is to improve healthcare rather than to punish professionals. It is critical that such a system not only prevents unjustified discrimination but promotes procedural human rights and is consistent with best practice.
10. Fifthly, if the full benefits of such a system are to be harnessed by NHS Scotland, health professionals should be able to have enough confidence to raise concerns about their own performance. As the consultation rightly points out, poor performance is rarely deliberate or pre-meditated and may also be a cause of anguish and anxiety to the professional themselves.
11. Lastly, health professionals also 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.

Proposals

12. We support the creation of a central resource within NHS Scotland to assist employers dealing with such problems and the need for a confidential central collection, monitoring and auditing of returns from employers. However, we believe that the proposals could be strengthened further.
13. Firstly, there appears to be an assumption that all the tasks should be carried out by one body. Whilst it is crucial that the tasks are co-ordinated we believe that the Scottish Executive should consider the issue of incremental partnership. This would allow it the flexibility to extend the range of tasks and the partners that it could seek to work with.
14. Incremental change is change within the box of what is known in order to strengthen and improve what currently exists through a series of defined steps. An effective incremental partnership will enable a progressive relationship – based on trust and confidence – to flourish. The pace and level of change can be dictated by stakeholder concerns and resource issues.
15. Incremental partnership offers organisations step changes in service provision without comprehensive all-inclusive commitment and with lower risk. It means working with partners normally on a long term basis without an all-inclusive

arrangement. And it allows organisations to build up confidence with supplier partners, working with them to change existing processes, but without the expense and risks associated with a big bang approach proposed in the consultation document of contracting out all tasks to the private sector.

16. Secondly, we believe it is essential that data collection, information and analysis is as holistic as possible and that the Scottish Executive should examine the possibility of developing a proactive approach to predicting and preventing poor performance. This requires developing clear standards of data capture, analysis and information which is controlled and shaped at both a local and a national level.
17. 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.
18. 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.
19. 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.
20. Thirdly, we believe that NHS Scotland should consider a further task of ensuring that there is a public information channel through which the Scottish people can input information and can receive information about the framework for local employers. This will help to strengthen public confidence in the system's operation.

Conclusion

21. Northgate warmly welcomes the proposals contained within the consultation document. We think that these could be strengthened by greater emphasis on risk management, incremental partnership and a proactive approach to data management which identifies adverse trends and helps to pinpoint areas or issues relating to poor performance.
22. 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

We are 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 the Department of Health, the Healthcare Commission and a number of local health trusts, helping them to review and improve their performance.