For too long the NHS has lacked an information service that enables patients, professionals, doctors, and carers to make informed decisions. NHS Choices, an online portal, has been created to provide a unique ‘one-stop shop’ of easily accessible data. It will help both patients and health professionals take advantage of expanding provider choice. This Briefing explains the background to the new service and describes how it aims to revolutionise the provision of health information.

Meeting the demand for information

NHS Choices is about information. The evidence from the expert patient programme shows that patients want to be more involved in their care and will respond positively if given the right information.

Developed in conjunction with health professionals, the online service will enable patients to access the best information about conditions and treatments. Consumers currently access a plethora of health information via the internet, much of it of doubtful quality. Now doctors will be able to refer patients to a comprehensive source of information that is quality assured. NHS Choices will enable clinicians to give their patients information alongside their treatment.

NHS Choices will help people to become better equipped to make important personal decisions; authoritative information and research will help individuals understand their own health and the consequences of lifestyle choices. The aim is to harness the power of information technology to help the public become active consumers of healthcare rather than passive recipients. In time, this will give patients the opportunity to take

Key points

- NHS Choices is an online portal, to be launched in June at www.nhs.uk, which will provide data for patients and health professionals.
- The service is intended to help support the policy of free choice by providing patients with the data they need to make informed choices about their health and healthcare.
- Provider profiles, which will initially be available for acute hospitals, will enable providers to promote themselves to their local communities.
- Thirty five scorecards will be provided on the most common elective procedures; more will follow.
- NHS Choices will enable patients to provide feedback on their experience of the NHS.
greater responsibility for managing their own health.

There is, of course, a need to ensure that information is also readily available to those without immediate internet access: the creators of NHS Choices are determined to ensure that everybody benefits from the greater provision of data. To tackle the digital divide, information will be provided in formats that can be easily distributed by professionals and care groups. This will include pamphlet-style content that can be printed off in GP surgeries and in public libraries, and short videos that can be burned on to DVDs.

In addition, a major communications exercise will be undertaken with the voluntary and care sectors to ensure that there is both wide understanding and use of the information on the new service.

From launch, the website will deliver a suite of online services:

**Healthy choices**
- personal health information based on age, sex and location
- information that will help the well to stay fit and assist those who are unwell to manage their condition
- content which reflects the interests and needs of different groups such as teenagers, families and those aged over 70.

**Conditions and treatments**
- public access to the evidence base of the NHS to allow a deeper understanding of conditions and treatment options
- easy-to-understand multimedia guides on the most common procedures – for example, hip replacement

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**Objectives**

- To develop a 21st century health information service.
- To unlock the information assets of the NHS for both the public and professionals.
- To enable patients and professionals to make informed decisions about health and healthcare.
- To personalise the NHS experience.
- To reduce health inequalities.

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**Key features**

- Authoritative information on common conditions and procedures in multiple formats and settings – i.e. libraries and GP services.
- Provider scorecards for the most common procedures, that enable patients to benchmark services and make an informed decision about where they go for treatment.
- Provider profiles: a space for hospitals to promote services to their local communities.
- Voice: an opportunity for the public to comment and rate the quality of the treatment they receive and to allow providers to reply.
- An overnight news service which will provide a rapid, objective, evidence-based response to health stories in the media, such as claims about the effectiveness of new drugs.
- Targeted messages to different social groups to promote positive changes in health.
- Regularly changing healthcare information in a range of online magazines targeted at specific groups such as teenagers, parents and retired people.
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- detailed guides to living with long-term conditions such as diabetes will help patients manage their condition.

**Health service choices**
- authoritative, comparative data on the standards and availability of services
- searchable, comprehensive directories – for example, on hospitals and GPs
- a quality scorecard that will help patients and GPs together to identify the most appropriate treatment and locations
- provider profiles that detail individual hospital facilities.

**Giving people a voice**
- patients will be able to comment and deliver feedback on their hospital
- comments will be moderated and acute providers will have the opportunity to provide an immediate response to comments about their services.

**Benefits**

The NHS Choices service has a number of important benefits for consumers, providers and healthcare commissioners.

For the first time, prospective patients will have access to information that will enable them to make meaningful choices about where they receive treatment. Those for whom waiting time is a critical factor will be able to identify the most appropriate hospital, while others who may wish to base their decision on travelling times, or incidence of MRSA, will have their preferences met.

The opportunity for patients to provide feedback on their treatment will provide a valuable additional source of helpful information for other patients when deciding when and where to have their treatment. Equally, providers will have a steady flow of high-quality feedback from the public on their service, which will be valuable for identifying areas in need of improvement.

NHS Choices will also enable hospitals to provide more information than is currently the case on nhs.uk. They will be able to promote themselves to their local communities by highlighting specific services, facilities, hospital accommodation and initiatives such as their range of emergency services, and provision of faith-based and counselling services. In addition, specific data on outcomes and other statistical information will demonstrate the particular strengths of individual hospitals.

Commissioners will benefit from the enhanced awareness of comparative information. Richer data on waiting times, length of stay and number of patients treated will be readily available from all provider hospitals in a specific area. Comparative information on readmission rates in different hospitals will also be freely available. This will drive up efficiency and increase cost competitiveness.

**Summary**

NHS Choices reflects the information age – a world in which expanding amounts of data are communicated and received with increasing speed. People expect and demand information to make decisions about many aspects of daily life, from choosing schools to planning their careers. People no longer expect to be told how to live their lives by government or politicians; rather they seek reliable information upon which to make their own decisions. The demand for accredited health information is huge: NHS Choices helps fulfil that need.

**Future development**

The NHS Choices programme will continue to evolve and significant extensions are scheduled for later in 2007 and 2008. These will include:

- online communities in which patients can share knowledge
- extension of clinical scorecards, in association with clinical bodies
- development of scorecards in primary care
- mobile-enabled services.
Frequently asked questions

Who is producing NHS Choices?
NHS Choices is a programme currently managed by the Department of Health (DH) on behalf of the NHS, but ownership of the project will transfer to the NHS.

Why do we need NHS Choices?
To make choice and personalised healthcare for all a reality, there needs to be a comprehensive information source from which patients and clinicians can easily obtain the information they need.

Don’t current NHS websites already provide this information?
While NHS Choices will draw some of its content from existing sources such as NHS Direct and nhs.uk, the new website will radically expand the level and quality of information that is readily available to both patients and health professionals. This will include access to a library of medically accredited information, such as the National Electronic Library for Health and other sources of quality information outside the NHS. Similarly, the website will provide an easy-to-use, single gateway to comparative data on individual hospital performance.

There are several important new features of the new service. Patient ‘voice’ is just one – for the first time, patients will have the opportunity to provide immediate feedback on their treatment and hospital experience, and access the views of others.

How much of the content in June will be new?
There will be a huge amount of new content available to patients and professionals when NHS Choices launches. This will include:

- comprehensive and accessible information on 55 common conditions and treatments, including newly commissioned videos and podcasts
- a ‘what’s the evidence’ section that will provide a factual response to daily news stories relating to claims about new treatments/drugs etc; this will include 25 archived for launch
- a number of magazines based on healthy living, segmented by age and gender
- ‘voice’ – for the first time, patients will have the opportunity to provide direct feedback on their health experience
- ‘scorecards’ for 35 common procedures that will assist patients and professionals to make personalised health choices.

How does NHS Choices promote NHS reform?
It complements the DH’s policy of extending choice and the provision of better information to help people make decisions about their own health.

Patients can choose to be referred to any provider – NHS or independent sector – that meets eligibility criteria and provides NHS standards of treatment at a cost the NHS is prepared to pay. Free choice will be introduced in the NHS in England on 1 April next year.

During 2007/08 there will be a phased implementation of free choice on a specialty by specialty basis, starting with orthopaedics in July this year.

How much will the site cost?
It is estimated that the cost will be £15 million in financial year 2007/08.

Hospital scorecards: why produce these indicators?
Informed choice requires reliable, relevant, easily accessible information. This should cover all aspects of services that are important to patients, including clinical quality. Patient groups and individual patients have asked for information on clinical quality.

Which measures will be used?
Three types of measures are used:

Generic indicators for each of the procedures:
- total wait
- volume
- readmission rate
- day-case rate/ length of stay.
Indicators specific to treatment:

- for example, in the case of hip replacements, whether the trust only uses prostheses approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

Trust indicators:

- Healthcare Commission ratings on overall quality of services and patient satisfaction
- data, privacy
- infection control
- surgical site infection.

How were the scorecards devised?

The scorecards have been developed in conjunction with health professionals. A clinical advisory group, chaired by cardiac surgeon Professor Sir Bruce Keogh and comprising three other clinicians, has advised on the construction and presentation of the indicators. Relevant representative bodies were then invited to comment and review each draft scorecard. Drawing on this feedback, the group made recommendations to the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) on each of the proposed indicators. The CMO is responsible for the final sign-off of each scorecard.

Have they been accepted by the medical profession?

The clinical advisory group has discussed the scorecards with each of the representative bodies and they are comfortable with the proposed content and format. They will be working with the NHS Choices team to develop the indicators, moving forward to improve and extend the data available to patients and professionals. Each representative body (medical royal college or specialty association) has been asked to nominate someone to liaise closely on further developments of the scorecards.

How many procedures will have scorecards at launch?

There will be 35 scorecards when NHS Choices is launched in June. These will reflect the most common elective procedures, including a few extra orthopaedic procedures to coincide with the launch of orthopaedic free choice.

A warm welcome for NHS Choices

“There is no good choice without good information. The interactive service that NHS Choices will provide will give a wide range of quality information in one place for people who use NHS care. Most importantly, it will give patients themselves the power to comment on the services they have used and to see and share the views of others. The users council will safeguard the independence and integrity of the information and advise on accessibility.”

Harry Cayton, national director for patients and the public; chair of the Care Record Development Board

“NHS Choices will tackle health inequalities by enabling health professionals to engage with their patients in the most disadvantaged communities. This initiative will be instrumental to our goal of providing truly personalised healthcare for all.”

NHS chief executive David Nicholson

“I welcome this new website because it will mean that patients and I will be using the same authoritative clinical information. It will also give me an instant library of patient information, which I can use during consultations and provide to patients.”

Dr Tom Coffey, GP and professional executive committee chair, South West London

“This will be an invaluable tool for health professionals, enabling them to get patients more engaged in their treatment, particularly those from communities that traditionally suffer from poorer health, such as ethnic minority groups, the unemployed and those with learning disabilities.”

Lord Adebowale, chief executive of Turning Point
Will NHS Choices include information on independent sector treatment centres and private providers?
Where available, comparative data will be provided. All hospitals will have the opportunity to compile a provider profile.

Where can I get further information?
Contact the NHS Choices team.
Phone 0845 402 3089
Email: confed@nhschoices.nhs.uk

NHS Confederation views

The NHS Confederation has started to work with the NHS Choices programme to ensure that it is shaped by the view of NHS organisations:

- this Briefing is a starting point to build awareness and understanding
- we have hosted a workshop on the ‘voice’ feature
- we are planning a series of workshops across England over the summer
- we have agreed to set up an ongoing steering group of NHS organisations to feed into the governance of NHS Choices.

If you are interested in getting involved in this work, please email Helen Bradburn, NHS Confederation director of communications, at Helen.Bradburn@nhsconfed.org

The NHS Confederation

The NHS Confederation is the independent membership body for the full range of organisations that make up the modern NHS. We help our members improve health and patient care by:

- influencing policy, implementation and the public debate
- supporting leaders through networking, sharing information and learning
- promoting excellence in employment.

Confederation Briefings

NHS Confederation Briefings are summaries of government policy development, with a viewpoint from the perspective of NHS management.