

NHS Direct



What we did

NHS Direct treats each caller as an individual. Its mission is to give people information and advice about health, illness and services, to help them make informed decisions about their own care and that of their families. It handles around 6.5 million telephone calls a year and its website attracts more than 1.5m visits each month. In addition NHS Direct Interactive Digital TV is available either on Freeview by going to channel 108, or on Sky Digital by pressing the interactive button on the remote control. Sky Digital includes 3,000 pages of information on 500 health topics.

Increasingly, NHS Direct is the first port of call for people when they want advice or medical attention. This is especially apparent in busy periods such as Christmas, when additional pressure is put on the health service and GP surgeries are shut. NHS Direct takes the strain off other parts of the health service by using their tried and tested triage and assessment system. It helps people look after themselves at home where this is appropriate – roughly 40 per cent of all calls to NHS Direct are dealt with without needing to be referred on to other NHS services - and allocate more severe cases to the most appropriate health professionals or hospitals.

Call centre assessment

In 2000, NHS Direct selected a system from Capita's Healthcare decisions business to provide a call centre assessment solution. The system, specially adapted to suit NHS Direct's needs, combines rules-based and flexible, algorithm-based models for call centre assessment. Evidence-based questions and answers devised and developed by medical experts are presented in an easy to use, logical sequence, and used to assess the patient's condition. This provides a safe and consistent framework, but allows professional judgement and experience to be used to reach the best possible outcome.

The solution helps to minimise assessment time by streamlining calls and by documenting each event, freeing up advisers to answer calls rather than spend time on paperwork. This time saving becomes critical where staff costs are a major overhead. The system helps save professional time both in NHS Direct and the wider NHS. Callers are directed to the most appropriate service for their circumstances, thereby reducing the load on expensive clinicians and facilities that may have otherwise been used.

The NHS Direct experience has shown the benefit of being able to provide patient details to an Out-of-Hours GP, based on the initial assessment call. This provides the GP with details of symptoms enabling him to make an assessment more quickly.

The festive challenge

Over the ten day Christmas holiday period, NHS Direct received nearly 250,000 phone calls. Although this number was 15 per cent lower than last year there was a 30 per cent increase in visitors to the website which received more than 340,000 visits over the same period. The busiest days for calls were Saturday 23rd and 30th December 2006 with nearly 35,000 calls each day. The top ten patient illnesses were:

- Abdominal pain
- Dental/tooth/jaw pain
- Cough
- Vomiting
- Toothache
- Sore throat
- Chest pain
- Diarrhoea
- Ear ache
- Toddlers with fever

Find out more at

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