



The Consumer Healthcare Association

The future
of the NHS:

**Self care during and beyond the
COVID-19 pandemic**

August 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed exceptional and unprecedented strain on all parts of the NHS. Faced with no script to follow, the health service has had to rapidly innovate to ensure that its finite resources can deliver the best possible care for the people who need it the most.

In doing so, the NHS has taken steps to accelerate the shift to self care, supporting individuals to take care of their own health and wellbeing, boosting health literacy and empowering community pharmacy.

The NHS is now looking to the future, considering how the health service can recover from the pandemic, and how it can embed the rapid innovations that have been made in a meaningful way to ensure the long term sustainability of vital NHS services.

This paper sets out:

- The importance of self care in the context of COVID-19
- Positive steps the NHS, and particularly pharmacy, has taken which can be harnessed for self care
- The steps that can be taken to embed self care now and for the long term

PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, is committed to supporting the NHS to ensure it can rebound from the current crisis. For further information, please contact selfcare@pagb.co.uk.

The importance of self care in the context of COVID-19

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens were advised against visiting GP practices, urgent care centres and A&E services. As a result, people have been required to practice self care – both for self-treatable conditions and specifically for coronavirus, where individuals with symptoms have been advised to stay at home and look after themselves. In addition, community pharmacies have become an essential place to receive health advice and purchase over-the-counter medicines.

Self care comprises the actions that individuals take for themselves, on behalf of and with others, to develop, protect, maintain and improve their health, wellbeing or wellness. Self care is not 'no care', but rather an important, and often overlooked, part of the primary care pathway.

A PAGB survey¹, carried out in June 2020, found that almost seven in 10 respondents (69%) who would have not considered self care as their first option before the pandemic, said they were more likely to do so in the future. Overall, almost one in four people (24%) said COVID-19 had changed their attitude to self care.

¹A survey of 2,035 adults was carried out by PureProfile on behalf of PAGB between 22 June and 1 July 2020.

Positive steps the NHS has taken which can be harnessed for self care

This shift towards self care, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has helped to:



Enhance the role of community pharmacy



Reduce pressure on GP services and enable healthcare professionals to provide care to those who need it most



Accelerate the adoption of a digital first approach

Enhancing the role of community pharmacy

Over 99% of those living in areas of highest deprivation are within a 20-minute walk of a community pharmacy, making pharmacies an accessible resource for people with health concerns living in these areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought health inequalities into sharp focus, and the role of accessible health services, like community pharmacies, is more important than ever. Their role has been enhanced as pharmacists and their teams have rightly been recognised as key frontline healthcare professionals in the fight against COVID-19.

The PAGB survey found that almost a third of people (31%) who would not normally consult a pharmacist as their first option, said they would be more likely to do so in the future.

In England, additional information has been added to NHS Summary Care Records so that healthcare professionals including community pharmacists can quickly assess and treat patients. In Scotland, the Minor Ailment service has been extended to support community pharmacies to perform an enhanced role during the pandemic.

Reducing pressure on services

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, there were an estimated 18 million GP appointments per year and 3.7 million A&E visits per year for self-treatable conditions, which people could have managed themselves or for which a pharmacist should have been the first port of call. This 'ordinary' health and care demand places unnecessary pressures on GP, A&E and other urgent care services.

PAGB has estimated that if people were empowered with the right information and advice to take care of their own health, £1.5 billion² of efficiency savings could be released back into the system. Importantly, given the coronavirus outbreak, the time freed up in not dealing with these self-treatable conditions could be made available to treat individuals with more serious COVID-19 symptoms, as well as other acute or long-term health conditions that need medical attention.

The PAGB survey found that among people who previously considered A&E as an acceptable route to access care for self-treatable conditions, more than seven out of 10 (71%) said it was less likely to be their first option after the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, 51% of those who previously sought a GP appointment as their first option said they were less likely to do so after the pandemic.

We estimate that if those people who said they are now more likely to choose self care, instead of seeing their GP or going to A&E, actually do change their behaviour, the potential saving to the NHS is more than £780 million³ a year.

The increased demand for OTC products, such as paracetamol, at the start of the lockdown period emphasises the important role of non-prescription medicines in tackling milder cases of COVID-19. Access to products for non-COVID-19 related conditions from pharmacies or other retailers also relieves pressure on GPs and enables people to self care.

Accelerating the adoption of a digital-first approach

Faced with exceptionally challenging circumstances, the NHS has responded quickly to innovate and accelerate digital transformation to ensure that its finite resources can deliver the best possible care for the people who need it the most, including through remote care. In doing so it has taken steps to accelerate the shift to self care.

The demand for health information online has been clearly demonstrated during the pandemic. On 17 March 2020 the NHS 111 online service had 950,000 users, compared to a daily average prior to the pandemic of approximately 10,000. While the number of people accessing health information online had been increasing prior to the outbreak, the key concern was around ensuring people were accessing reliable information from trusted sources.

NHS England has also recognised the value of online symptom checkers and triaging tools, issuing a rapid response tender for the procurement of digital tools to support online primary care services during the coronavirus outbreak. The NHS 111 online assessment tool has been configured to directly assess people for coronavirus symptoms.

² £1.5 billion calculated from: £810 million a year from GP appointments for self-treatable conditions; £25 million could be saved if NHS 111 callers were appropriately referred to self care; £518 million from A&E attendances for self-treatable conditions; and £200 million could be saved by reducing prescriptions for OTC products for self-treatable conditions: <https://www.pagb.co.uk/policy/self-care-white-paper/>.

³ Calculation based on the costings in the PAGB Self Care White Paper <https://www.pagb.co.uk/policy/self-care-white-paper/> and the proportion of people in the survey who reported they would change their behaviour.

Steps to accelerate the shift to self care in the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The NHS is now beginning to look at the next phase of its response to COVID-19. In doing so, much attention will be paid to the NHS's short-term recovery, dealing with the backlog of GP and outpatient appointments which have not been possible during the pandemic. It will be critical to ensure that those people with self-treatable conditions continue to self care and do not automatically seek medical attention as soon as services begin to normalise again, in order to ensure further pressure is not added to the system as it recovers, and to free-up NHS time to treat a backlog of patients who require treatment or professional care.

There is a huge opportunity to drive forward the innovation that we have seen in the past few months, meaningfully empower community pharmacy to enable them to offer proactive advice and over-the-counter medicines as the first port-of-call for patients and thereby support a long term shift to self care. It is vital, therefore, to embed those self care behaviours that people have learned, or at least practised, during the crisis phase of the pandemic.

NHS England should prioritise actions to ensure that self care best practice and new innovations are captured and applied at a national level. These actions can be taken now and will serve to benefit the NHS in both the short, medium and longer term.

These actions should be meaningfully embedded into the healthcare system through a National Self Care Strategy:

1. **NHS England should maximise the development and use of online symptom checkers, ensuring that self care information is signposted from all relevant areas on the NHS App and on the NHS.uk website.** This will enable people to access trusted information to encourage proactive self care behaviour, including information to help people identify their symptoms, understand the normal duration of symptoms, self care treatment options and red flags which require medical attention
2. **NHS online advice on self care should be signposted from all CCG and GP Practice websites,** to broaden access and ensure people are signposted to the correct advice, at the right time. These websites should consistently include clear signposting to central NHS information and self care advice, positioning community pharmacy as the first port-of-call
3. **Community pharmacists must be given appropriate access to medical records.** Allowing them to populate medical records will ensure treatment advice is recorded consistently, improve the integration of health and care services, maintain health system efficiency and support continuity across NHS services. It will also increase the public's confidence in pharmacists and their role as expert healthcare professionals

4. **Community pharmacists must be empowered to refer people on to other healthcare professionals when appropriate, fast tracked if necessary.** This will support a shift towards community pharmacy as the first port-of-call for healthcare advice, as people will know that if they visit a pharmacy, they will either leave with some advice and/or treatment to manage their symptoms or an appointment to see an appropriate healthcare professional who can help
5. **Community pharmacists must be enabled to take referrals for consultations about self-treatable conditions from NHS 111 online.** Currently, the Community Pharmacy Consultation Service only allows referrals from the NHS 111 telephone line, and only requests for urgent supply of repeat medications can be made online.
6. **Appropriate referral pathways must also be put in place to encourage other healthcare professionals to refer directly to pharmacy for self care advice.** Putting appropriate pathways in place will support confidence in referral to pharmacy, removing the pressure to provide treatment or care when self care is appropriate. It will also boost confidence in community pharmacy as the first port-of-call for healthcare advice
7. **National public health campaigns should be redirected to prioritise self care messaging. In light of the crisis,** they have been focused on immediate health protection advice on hygiene and behaviours to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In the longer term, they should be redirected to signpost to reliable online information, encouraging and promoting self care and reiterating the role of community pharmacy for advice and treatment

We are presented with a unique opportunity to embed self care behaviour into the NHS and in people's lives. If people return to doing what they did before, this opportunity will be lost, and the unnecessary demand of self-treatable conditions will continue to be felt in primary and urgent care settings throughout the NHS.

The Government and NHS England must prioritise the development of a national strategy for self care to place the NHS on a sustainable, long term footing. PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, stands ready to support the Government and NHS to support the health system to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, empower community pharmacy and shift the NHS towards a sustainable, long term focus on self care.

For further information, please contact selfcare@pagb.co.uk.

The PAGB logo consists of the letters 'PAGB' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, set against a dark green, irregularly shaped background that resembles a stylized leaf or a shield.

**Shaping the future.
Together.**

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