



Category: Not-for-Profit Campaign

Company: NHS North of England Commissioning Support

Entry title: Savings for over the counter prescribing

Brief and objectives:

The NHS each year spends:

- £22.8 million on constipation – enough to fund around 900 community nurses
- £3 million on athlete’s foot and other fungal infections – enough to fund 810 hip operations
- £2.8 million on diarrhoea – enough to fund 2912 cataract operations

Some products can be purchased over the counter at a lower cost than that which would be incurred by the NHS – for example, a pack of 12 anti-sickness tablets can be purchased for £2.18 from a pharmacy whereas the cost to the NHS is over £3 after including dispensing fees, and over £35 when you include GP consultation and other administration costs. Similarly some common tablets are on average four times more expensive when provided on prescription by the NHS.

Working across the NHS system in the North East and Cumbria, NECS were tasked with developing and delivering an at-scale approach to support efficiencies around over the counter prescribing.

This included raising awareness with patients and the public around the costs of prescribing medicines that are routinely available for the patient to buy from pharmacies and other outlets, such as paracetamol and hay fever medication. The overall aim was to save money on prescribing costs for items that patients can easily buy to treat self-limiting minor ailments, which would allow the savings to be used elsewhere in the healthcare system.

The marketing team needed to work across the region to create an innovative and memorable campaign. The team also needed to plan wider communications and stakeholder handling around the scheme in order to manage the reputation of the CCGs.

A suite of materials needed to be produced to promote these messages in a co-ordinated manner to ensure that all messages were consistent across the region.

Rationale behind campaign, including research and planning:

In 2016-17 A survey carried out by NHS England found only 6% of parents with children under the age of five years would visit a pharmacy with minor health concerns. More than a third (35%) would opt for an appointment with their GP, while 5% of those questioned would choose emergency care as their first point of call.

This is despite the majority of adults (79%) saying they were aware that pharmacists are qualified healthcare professionals who can give advice on the most common illnesses, including when and where to seek advice for more serious conditions.

NHS England estimates that around 18 million GP appointments and 2.1 million visits to A&E are for self-treatable conditions, such as coughs and stomach troubles, costing the NHS more than £850m each year.

An estimated 95% of the population of England live within a 20-minute walk of a local community pharmacy.

Following this research, a suite of communications materials was produced and distributed to GP practices, walk-in centres, A&E departments and pharmacies for prescribers who wanted to use it to help with the discussion during interaction with patients to promote self-care.

The approach was supported by proactive communications through the media, information on CCG websites and social media. Media statements were produced and sent to all media outlets across the health and care system, FAQs were produced and distributed, Freedom of Information requests were responded to and any media handling took place as needed, as well as responding to social media in real time.

Audiences and stakeholders included local medical and pharmaceutical committees, GPs and practices, pharmacists, prescribers, healthcare workers, MPs and Healthwatch organisations.

Key messages included:

- The NHS is under increasing financial pressure and we need to look at ways in which we can save money
- The amount of money prescribing paracetamol and other medicines costs the NHS each year
- Promoting the use of pharmacies as a first port of call for self-limiting conditions

The creative aimed to get people thinking about taking more responsibility of self-care instead of the default position of making an appointment and getting a prescription from their GP encouraging behavioural change in people to ultimately self-care and purchase medication from a pharmacy.

Strategy and tactics, including creativity and innovation:

We created www.mymedicinesmyhealth.org.uk for stakeholders to access all campaign creative, blogs, useful information and creative.

We challenged perceptions and behaviour of patients and the public through discussions with health professionals.

We empowered and encouraged GPs and healthcare workers to challenge these patient behaviours.

We created powerful artwork to get messages across and to encourage people to think before accessing NHS services.

We encouraged members of the public to take our key messages and share them on social media; we believed that organic messages from real people would generate more engagement. This was proven to be the case with one of our Facebook posts which explained that the cost of paracetamols to the NHS being £10 when they could be purchased from a high street shop for 45p - the post received over 700 likes and over 800 shares.

Implementation of tactics:

The team briefed all healthcare staff across the region ensuring a consistent message was given to patients. We sent out briefings to all stakeholders including pharmacies asking them to support the campaign, provide over the counter advice and support and to display the campaign materials.

We sent out briefings to the local media and provided a spokesperson for media interview requests.

We created a series of social media creative and messages and scheduled them to go out across a number of healthcare organisation social media accounts for consistency and increased impact.

Measurement and evaluation:

During a 12 month period, the campaign made savings of over 1 million across the region helping redirect money to other urgent healthcare needs.

Campaign materials were successfully distributed to all pharmacies, walk-in centres, A&E departments and GP practices across the region.

The social media campaign was well received, with several other regions requesting the campaign artwork to promote similar messages within their area.

Following success of the campaign, NECS were asked to promote NHS England's national consultation regarding over the counter prescribing on behalf of the region's CCGs. The team has since communicated the outcome of the national consultation across the region.

In March 2018 NHS England released the findings from a national consultation and recommendations on the conditions for which over the counter items should not be routinely prescribed in primary care. The findings mirrored the local evidence and research that we had gathered so the North East and North Cumbria areas were ahead of the curve and had already made significant savings prior to the recommendations being released.

Budget and cost effectiveness:

The overall cost of the campaign was under £12,000 which included:

Print, design, mailing house distributing marketing collateral and briefings to over 45,000 stakeholders, website and social media development.