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PSNC Briefing 010/16: The NIB and health apps

This briefing provides pharmacy contractors and LPCs with a summary of the National Information Board's (NIB) work to support the development of high quality health apps which can be used by health and care professionals and citizens.

In the future the recommendation to a patient to use a high quality app may be as common an occurrence in pharmacies as provision of verbal advice on lifestyle or a patient's medicines, so this NIB work has the potential to make a significant impact on the future work of pharmacy teams.

What is the National Information Board?

The [NIB](#) is a broad advisory group, which includes representatives from national health and care bodies, together with clinical leaders, local government, and civil society members. It sets data and technology priorities in health and care and advises the Department of Health. NIB membership is broad and includes organisations such as the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC), NHS England, and the strategic clinical reference group. You can find out more about the NIB on its [website](#), and in [PSNC Briefing 009/16: The NIB](#).

What is a health app?

The words "app" or "apps" are used to describe digital applications, which may include either a mobile app used on a smartphone or other device, a web-based application or in certain cases a digital service which may be used by health and care staff and or patients and citizens to support the provision of health and care services. For example a pharmacy related app may be software which runs on a person's smartphone to remind them to take their regular medicines.

The NIB and health apps

The NIB has a work stream focussed on health apps with a high level objective to provide citizens with access to a set of NHS and care digital applications, which have been assessed by the health and care system, to enable them to make the right health and care choices.

The assumption underlying the objective is that an assessment framework for applications will enable health and care professionals to recommend the use of safe and effective digital applications and give greater confidence to patients and citizens to select and use them.

The NIB's health app work streams and recommendations include:

- a review of the health apps market;
- health app regulation and NHS endorsement is to be considered via an assessment framework;
- the [nhs.uk apps library](#) is to be enhanced; and
- health apps innovation prizes are to be introduced.

The initial work involved a review of the app market and related research. A number of themes emerged from the evidence gathered, with the key themes summarised below:

- there is a large volume of apps (over 100,000 currently available in Europe);
- the popularity of apps is not necessarily linked to quality;
- the majority of apps are focused on health and wellbeing and have simple functionality;
- there are concerns over the safety of apps and their data security;
- the usability of apps can be a key challenge;
- there is mixed evidence regarding the impact/utility of apps;
- new research methods may be needed to evaluate the effectiveness of apps; and
- entering the NHS apps 'market' is challenging due the lack of a clear regulatory framework. The commercial incentives for doing so are also not clear.

Development of an app assessment framework

It is suggested that the app assessment process will deliver the following to users:

- It will be designed to identify and promote the best apps for a specific disease or condition or function. It will not systematically assess nor provide a comprehensive review of all health apps;
- The app assessment framework and methods will define what good looks like, creating a new benchmark of quality for the health apps market – for all app developers to aim for when developing apps and for all users of apps to expect when selecting apps for themselves, and for the NHS when it is promoting apps;
- The assessment process will not be a regulatory process and as such will not provide nor take away permission to market apps to patients or the NHS (although the process may refer apps to the relevant regulatory authorities where appropriate). It will not prevent poor apps being developed and made available; and
- The assessment process will not be able to cover all categories of apps, or at least to cover all categories in the same depth. Assessment may need to start with some segments of the app market and expand over time.

The NIB recognises that any model for assessing apps would serve no purpose if the results from assessment were not communicated and used to change practice and behaviours in order to produce better outcomes. Critical to the assessment framework are therefore the mechanisms which will be put in place to ensure the outcome is communicated and used by end users and professionals.

- The outcome of assessment will be made available to health professionals, such as GPs and pharmacists. Integration of this information into the clinical systems they use will be critical. Health professionals will be encouraged to take account of the outcome of the assessment process;
- Commissioners will also have access to the outcome of assessment. Commissioners may be guided by the assessment when investing in digital technologies. Some may want local app developers with which they are collaborating to undergo the assessment process;
- Patients, service users and citizens will be signposted towards recommended apps when they visit digital services such as NHS Choices to enquire about a condition or their wellbeing. It is also the NIB's ambition that recommended apps may be available as part of an elite category in the leading apps stores; and
- The assessment framework will set a benchmark for producing quality health and care applications. The NIB expect app developers will be able to improve their product as they follow the guidance which underpins the assessment process. Similarly, this information will be available to users and commissioners of apps who will become educated on what good looks like.

Pharmacists, nurses, and GPs are considered key user groups to engage in this work as the NIB expects they will be key users of the app assessment system. The NIB are expected to consider the role of pharmacists in recommending apps to patients and citizens, and will also conduct user research activities with pharmacists.

Find out more about community pharmacy IT at psnc.org.uk/it. If you have queries on this PSNC Briefing or you require more information please contact [Daniel Ah-Thion, EPS Lead](mailto:Daniel.Ah-Thion@psnc.org.uk).