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PSNC Briefing 039/15: Health & Social Care information standard (the information standard)

This PSNC Briefing outlines the information standard. The information standard is a document containing standards in relation to the processing of information. On 24th June 2015, NHS England issued an information standard aimed at making health and social care information accessible. This Briefing outlines what contractors must do to comply with the information standard before it is fully implemented on 31 July 2016.

What is the information standard and why does it matter?

The information Standard is a document containing standards in relation to the processing of information. On 24th June 2015, NHS England issued an information standard aimed at making health and social care information accessible. The information standard aims to provide people who have a disability, impairment or sensory loss with information that they can easily read or understand. This means NHS contractors have a role to play to help ensure people get information in different formats, for example in large print, braille or via a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter.

Does the information standard apply to me?

Under the Health & Social Care Act 2012, any person (other than a public body) who provides health services, or adult social care in England, pursuant to arrangements made with a public body exercising functions in connection with the provision of such services or care “must have regard to an information standard”. Accordingly, community pharmacy contractors come under the Act and it is a legal obligation for them to have regard to the information standard ([Section 250 Health & Social Care Act 2012](#)).

It is recommended that all pharmacy contractors obtain a copy and become familiar with the information standard: [NHS England accessible information](#)

Pharmacy contractors will be familiar with the Equality Act which protects a number of categories of persons including “disabled” persons from discrimination. The blind, visually impaired and hearing impaired are deemed automatically “disabled” under the Equality Act and so benefit from protection.

The information standard can be seen as another facet consistent with the principles of the Equality Act with the aim of removing barriers faced by patients who have information or communication needs relating to a disability, impairment or sensory loss (and where appropriate carers and parents) when accessing pharmacy services. However, the obligations under the information standard are separate and distinct from pharmacy contractors’ obligations under the Equality Act.

How do I comply with the information standard?

The points below outline what pharmacy contractors are expected to do in order to meet the different aspects of NHS England's information standard.

Ask: To follow the information standard pharmacy contractors need to ask people if they have any information or communication needs. If so then the pharmacy contractor should explore ways in which to meet those needs e.g. those people who have difficulty reading information in small print should be provided with the information in large print. Each situation will be different and care should be taken to ensure that patients, service users, carers and parents can access and understand the information they are given.

Record: The contractor should document in the patients' record (probably the patient medication record) that the patient has been asked if they have any information or communication needs and an entry note made that information or communication needs have been identified. The contractor should then highlight or flag the patient's record so it is clear that they have information or communication needs and how to meet those needs.

Share: Once it is established that the patient has an information or communication needs then the pharmacy contractor should ask the patient for their consent to share this information with other providers of NHS and adult social care services where required in the course of providing pharmaceutical services. An example of how this could operate in practice is where a pharmacy contractor undertakes a Medicines Use Review (MUR) on a patient taking multiple medicines, particularly those receiving medicines for long term conditions. During the course of the MUR consultation, the patient could mention to the pharmacist that they find it difficult to see the wording on the labelling on the medicines container. The pharmacist should then ask the patient for their consent for them to share this information with the patient's GP. If they give consent then the pharmacist should ensure that the GP is aware and document what you have done. You may wish to suggest that to meet the communication need that large print documentation should be used for the patient.

If the patient declines to give consent then the contractor should not share information about that patient's information or communication needs. Pharmacists and Pharmacy Technicians have a professional and legal duty of confidentiality codified in the [GPHC's Standards of Conduct, ethics and performance](#) (see in particular paragraph 3.6). The contractor should always be aware that patient confidentiality is paramount and generally confidential information should not be shared with third parties, even where this is the patient's GP, unless with the express consent of the patient or unless otherwise required by law.

Act: Contractors should take steps to ensure that patients receive information which they can access and understand, and receive communication support if they need it

How does the information standard work in practice?

NHS England have included in their [accessible information specification guidance](#) some flowchart diagrams to provide an overview of how the information standard could work in practice, using two common scenarios namely new patient registration and existing patient repeat contact to make an appointment. These are not identical to the interactions that occur in a pharmacy, but there are parallels which may be triggered if a patient presents a prescription at the pharmacy for the first time.

When should I comply with the information standard?

Contractors may implement the information standard immediately. However, no later than **31 July 2016**, pharmacy contractors **must** be fully compliant with all aspects of the information standard.

What now?

NHS England has provided guidance as to interim time scales:

- No later than 1st September 2015, pharmacy contractors must have begun to prepare for implementation of the Standard, including through assessing their current systems and processes, and developing and commencing roll out of a local implementation plan in order to achieve implementation of and compliance with the information standard in line with published deadlines.
- No later than 1st April 2016, pharmacy contractors must have made necessary changes such that they routinely identify and record the information and communication needs of their patients or service users (and where appropriate their carers or parents) at first registration or interaction with their service. In addition, contractors must identify the communication or information support needs of their existing registered or known patients or service users (and where appropriate their carers or parents) during routine appointments or interactions with the service.

PSNC's viewpoint

PSNC recognise that the information standard is likely to add to the already significant administrative and financial burdens on pharmacy contractors and we will raise these concerns with NHS England in due course.

We also are in the process of reviewing what further resources/toolkit, we can develop to support pharmacy contractors.

Further information

There is more information about the accessible information standard, including the Specification and Implementation Guidance, on the [NHS England Website](#).

In cases where clarification is needed, NHS England could be contacted for advice. NHS England can be contacted by email at england.nhs.participation@nhs.net or on 01138 253002. Alternatively, you can write to Accessible Information Standard, NHS England, 7E56, Quarry House, Quarry Hill, Leeds, LS2 7UE.

Further information, including more information in alternative formats, will be published on the NHS England website during summer and autumn 2015. Charities including [Action on Hearing Loss](#), [CHANGE](#), [Sense](#), and the [Royal National Institute of Blind people \(RNIB\)](#) will also be publishing information.

The 'Information Standards Notice' which is the formal document which tells organisations that they must follow the standard is published on the [Health & Social Care Information Centre website](#)

If you have queries on this PSNC Briefing or you require more information please contact [William Goh, Regulations Officer](#).