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PSNC Briefing 086/17: Features of higher quality health apps, and how to give app feedback

This briefing for pharmacy contractors and pharmacy teams is about apps. It explores the features of higher quality apps and explains how pharmacy teams or patients can provide feedback about apps.

Background and app types

An 'app' is a digital application. It could be run on a smartphone or another device. It could be a web-based application, or a digital service used to support health and care. Recommending that patients use high-quality apps may become common for pharmacy staff in the future. Common types of health apps include those below.

- a. **Medical apps** involve a medical purpose, such as diagnosis or treatment decisions (e.g. a dosage calculator app that recommends a medicine dose based on a patient's details). Medical apps are medical devices and therefore should be CE marked if sold within the UK. The MHRA has published [app guidance](#) and a [flow chart](#) that provides further information on apps and how to determine whether an app involves a medical purpose;
- b. **Medical device accessory apps** are apps which work in association with a CE-marked medical device, and so do not need their own CE mark, e.g. an app which connects to a blood pressure monitor; and
- c. **Health apps which are not classified as medical devices** might help to support a discussion with a clinician, but would not determine the treatment decision, e.g. an app that recorded or accessed data without complex calculations (e.g. an electronic health record or a simple step-monitoring app).

Features of higher quality health apps

If pharmacy team members are to use apps in the pharmacy or recommend them to patients, it is important that the app is of an appropriate quality. Higher quality health apps will demonstrate certain features, for example they will be usable.

1. Usable

Usable apps:

- are convenient, intuitive and enjoyable to use over a long-time period;
- suit their audience, e.g. pharmacy staff or patients;
- mitigate against impairments that affect usage (e.g. reduced screen sensitivity if users may have motor impairments);
- clear present information; and
- are user-tested on an ongoing basis to allow improvements to be made.



2. Reliable information given

Reliable apps provide clear and transparent information. Their terms and conditions are clear and easily understood. Reliable apps do not: oversimplify health issues; promote or exploit hypochondria; or go against recommended clinical practice.



3. Secure

Secure apps protect patients' data. Secure apps:

- are encrypted and protected from malware and threats;
- collect only the information necessary, to limit the adverse consequences if app data were to be leaked or hacked; and
- are updated to avoid risk from new threats.



A study in 2014 found that more than half of those health apps tested were not taking the necessary security measures such as sufficient encryption of data.¹

4. Interoperable records used



Health data recorded into some apps may be held in a 'silo' and may contribute to the fragmentation of health information and inconvenience for a user that wishes to re-use their data or share it with a clinician. Interoperable apps:

- may help to avoid data fragmentation; and
- have data which is interoperable with pharmacy and other health IT systems.

5. Evaluated



Assessing health apps is a challenging process to undertake. There are hundreds of thousands of health apps, and each one will change whenever it is 'updated'. The presence of a health app within an app store is not an indication of clinical value.

Whilst apps are not required to go through rigorous trials in the way that medicines must, a small number of apps are beginning to be studied and evaluated within peer-reviewed journals and via the developing Public Health England (PHE) assessment model. PHE published criteria for assessing health apps in October 2017. NHS Digital has started to assess apps for inclusion within its library.

6. Endorsed



Although no single endorsement can guarantee quality, the presence of an endorsement might support the decision of a patient to use an app, or a pharmacy team member to recommend an app, e.g. inclusion in the NHS Digital apps library.

7. Fair



Fair apps do not disadvantage potential users who could benefit, e.g. based on age, socioeconomics or digital literacy.

8. Uncompromised



Apps should not be compromised by conflicts of interest. Uncompromised apps:

- have a funding model which is communicated transparently to users;
- do not share app user data unnecessarily;
- which use data sharing agreements to help fund the development of the app, will explain to users which organisations could view their data; and
- are not inappropriately promoted by healthcare professionals involved with the app's design or profits.

Pharmacy apps and EPS nomination: Electronic Prescription Service (EPS) nomination must allow patient choice of pharmacy/dispenser and pharmacy/dispenser setting of nominations must only be undertaken where there is informed consent from the patient.

¹ Security Concerns in Android mHealth Apps (Europe PMC 2014)

A [poster](#) which sets out the right for patients to make their own choice has been produced and pharmacies are asked to display this prominently and as close as practicable to the location where patients receive prescriptions. Distance selling, internet pharmacies and apps which allow nomination-setting should display this information prominently on their websites/apps and take reasonable steps to bring this notice to the attention of all patients, for example by including a copy of this notice with dispensed medicines that are delivered to patients.

9. Value for money



Good-value apps have a cost that is fair and not prohibitive.

Considerations

If recommending apps to patients, you should consider:

- **Consent and patient considerations:** Informed consent from the patient is required for their use of an app. You must never sign the app terms and conditions on patients' behalf to avoid liability issues. Patients should be aware that some terms and conditions state the data they input into the app could be seen by others. You could give advice about higher quality features to help them to make informed choices, considering the potential benefits as well as the risks;
- **The importance of human touch** alongside the digital interactions which apps can offer - clinicians and support networks can have a powerful impact on wellness. Some apps could underestimate the importance of patient/clinician relationships and more generally the patient's wider human relationships; and
- **Maintaining your awareness of current lists of apps:** Ensure that you are aware of the commonly used app stores and [NHS Digital apps library](#).

Pharmacy use of apps

The Centre for Pharmacy Postgraduate Education (CPPE) maintains a [list](#) of apps that may be useful for pharmacy staff. Some of the listed apps are sources of information, some can be used during consultations with patients and some are for signposting to support healthy lifestyles and self-care.



Healthcare professionals are increasingly turning to apps such as: drug reference guides, medical calculators, clinical guidelines and other decision support aids, textbooks and literature search portals.

App feedback and reporting processes

Feedback

Give feedback to app developers to help them improve their apps. Contact them using either their link at their app store listing or using contact information from the developer's website.

Review

Reviews can be left at the app store listing or elsewhere online. If reviewing apps then consider whether the app demonstrates the features of higher quality apps described earlier.

Report

If you have concerns about a health app, you can report it to:

- **MHRA** those UK apps that are medical in nature but are either missing a CE mark even though this is required; or are poor in quality.



- [NHS Digital](#) those apps listed in the NHS Apps Library. NHS Digital previously requested that if you would like to report an issue with any individual library-listed app, please contact the app provider directly but also [email NHS Digital](#).
- [Information Commissioners Office \(ICO\)](#) those apps which might be misusing data.
- [National Reporting and Learning Service \(NRLS\)](#) those apps which may be contributing to the occurrence of patient safety incidents.
- [NHS England Identity team](#) those app developers which may be contravening [NHS identity/logo guidance](#) e.g. use of the NHS logo to suggest that the app developer or their product is allowing a free and fair choice of pharmacy. If the choice is limited, then this should be clear to all patients.
- The app store company - those apps which might be failing to meet expected standards e.g. [Apple App store](#) or [Google Play](#).

Further information

Read more at: [Apps and community pharmacy](#). If you have queries on this PSNC Briefing or you require more information please contact [Daniel Ah-Thion, Community Pharmacy IT Lead](#).