



## How NHS Pathways is providing more appropriate care to patients through 999 and NHS 111.

**The North East Ambulance Service (NEAS) has been using NHS Pathways for assessing 999 patients since 2006 and more recently for NHS 111 patients as a pathfinder site in County Durham and Darlington.**

NEAS call handlers use NHS Pathways to ask questions relating to a patient's symptoms to determine what treatment or care the patient requires. If an ambulance is not required, an integrated directory of services offers the call handler a number of options in the local area where the clinical skills needed to treat the patient are available.

These can include an urgent care centre, a GP or a district nurse. The system also recommends the appropriate timeframe for the patient to receive treatment. For those who do not need to see a clinician, advice is given to help manage their symptoms.

Using the same process, 999 callers who do not need an emergency response are directed to the most appropriate care for them, avoiding an unnecessary journey to A&E.

Joanna Thompson, who works for the North East Ambulance Service, has been handling NHS 111 calls since the pathfinder site was launched in August 2010 and says the service is providing a better patient experience for accessing urgent and emergency care.



*Joanna said: "NHS Pathways differs from other ambulance systems because it provides patients with the appropriate level of care in relation to their symptoms. By having the same system to assess 999 and 111 callers, care is better and the patient is receiving a consistent assessment and advice when they call."*

*"Before joining the NEAS, I worked in business support for the District Nursing Team and like many other people I thought if you dialled 999 you automatically got an ambulance. This was probably right at one time, but the system has taken a lot of pressure off the ambulance service because they can now send out paramedics to those who really need them and offer more appropriate care for those patients who would be better treated elsewhere than A&E. Patients assessed using NHS Pathways get the right treatment at the right time, whether they dial 999 or 111."*

*"Callers who need an emergency ambulance will notice no difference to the service. The dispatch of an ambulance is as swift as it has always been. For those people who don't need an ambulance, but perhaps have called 999 because they don't know where to go for help, we have been able to refer them to the right person for treatment."*



## ▶ NHS 111 and NHS Pathways

Joanna's main role is answering NHS 111 calls, but when it is extremely busy she does help with 999 calls too.

She said: *"When you take a 999 call you have to be really calm because of the way the calls come through. You can't take it personally when some callers are shouting and screaming at you. You have to have a similar sort of attitude for 111 calls, but you generally find patients are calmer when they call."*

*"People call 111 expecting to get some help but I don't think they realise that if needed an ambulance can be sent to them."*

*"A few weeks ago, I took a 111 call from a patient who had chest pains but was extremely calm. I assessed him using NHS Pathways and sent him an emergency ambulance because of the other features associated with the pain that came out during the assessment. These meant the chest pain had a lot of features of a heart attack. The patient didn't realise that by calling 111 he could actually be sent an emergency ambulance. The patient thought he had made a mistake calling 111 and now needed to call 999. I reassured him that it was fine and I could arrange the ambulance for him and he was actually speaking to me at the ambulance service."*

*"This is one of the benefits of having NHS Pathways because it works in an emergency and non-emergency environment and the patient receives consistent and appropriate care."*

*"Sometimes people don't trust you or accept when you advise them what to do because they don't realise that we are specially trained and that we are part of the ambulance service. Once you explain that you are part of the ambulance service they appear a lot calmer."*

*"Once a person has used 111 they seem comfortable using it again because they feel they are given the most appropriate level of care. A good experience builds their confidence because they know that the appropriate services will be offered to them and if they require an ambulance they will be treated just as they would had they called 999."*

## ▶ Support for call handlers

In a 111 and 999 contact centre there is always a clinician available in the room to give advice to call handlers on complex calls. The NHS Pathways system also gives supportive information to the clinician on difficult issues and this is really valuable when they themselves wish to speak to a caller about an issue.

Joanna added that the flexibility of the NHS Pathways system allows call takers to seek the support they need in a complex case and even go back and change an earlier answer if new information on the patient's condition later comes out. The fact that a change has been made is recorded but the system is not rigid and reflects that everything in life isn't just a 'yes or a no'.

Joanna said: *"The system supporting information is always there to guide you and there is always time to check it, even in emergency calls. If I feel unsure at the end of a call, I can ask the clinical supervisor to listen to my call, so I am able to check if I have missed anything."*

## ▶ Taking the lead

As part of Joanna's role she is a champion call taker, which means she has been buddying new call takers when they started answering calls. *"New staff look to me for reassurance until they are confident in their own abilities. For someone taking their first call I would say just be confident in your own ability, use the system to support you and listen to what the caller is saying. You can't go wrong,"* said Joanne.

*"I do love my job and I'm passionate about it, I'm happy in my role and the sense of job satisfaction I get from every single call whether it's an emergency or not, it's something very personal to me."*

*"I feel that it is such a satisfying role, it's fantastic to be able to come off the phone knowing I've helped someone, potentially saving a life until an ambulance arrives."*

For further information about NHS Pathways please visit <http://www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/systemsandservices/pathways>