



Confidence is the key to being an NHS Pathways call handler

Shaun Harris is a Single Point of Access and Emergency Medical Systems Operator working at North East Ambulance Service (NEAS). Shaun handles 111 and out of hours calls and during busy periods he acts-up as a supervisor.

Shaun has been a call handler since July 2009 and enjoys his work.

The initial call handler training (NHS Pathways Core Module One) is based around the eight competencies that are essential for using NHS Pathways in a safe and effective way.

Trainees have to cover basic anatomy, physiology and pathophysiology. The module also covers other elements such as learning about the clinical decision making care advice and communications skills in the context of using the system.

"The first day of training was really enlightening for me," comments Shaun. *"I learnt about symptoms for medical conditions like strokes and heart attacks. It was a tough course and we had a test at the end of it."*

"I enjoyed the training very much; the role-playing exercises were my favourite as they helped me to understand and put into practice the clinical knowledge I had learnt."



Shaun went into the NHS Pathways training with no preconceptions about what to expect. He believes that the more you use the system the more confident you become with it.

"Once you have dealt with a few calls you can control them better and when you get an obscure call you can deal with it confidently."

"There is always a nurse or a paramedic in the room who sits with you and is willing to go through any calls for anything that you are not sure about. That was invaluable because at the start, as long as I had that guidance to confirm that I was doing the right thing my confidence steadily grew."

For anyone considering a career in call handling Shaun says: *"Go in with an open mind and believe in yourself and the system. It was a three stage recruitment process so you've been picked because you have got the ability, so have confidence. You can't go wrong as long as you listen and apply your training."*

To be a call taker Shaun says: *"You need to be good at communicating, a good listener and have confidence in yourself and in the system. You need to be good at negotiating, thinking on your feet and adapting to situations because a lot of things can change during the call. Other important attributes are quick reactions and being methodical, so you can follow the process all the way through. I find the system very supportive and easy to use."*



"If you follow the training you can't go wrong with it. No one day is the same and anything can happen, it's really interesting. It keeps you on your toes, it's not mundane or boring, you are constantly thinking and every call is different. Although you're on a call by yourself you really feel like part of a team. It's been really enjoyable. I feel like I'm making a difference."

One of the key skills for being a call handler is 'probing'. This allows the call handler to get to know more about the caller's symptoms. This can mean the difference between the caller needing an ambulance and needing a doctor's appointment.

"We are told that it is really important to probe around certain questions but not to ask leading questions and to go with the answers that the callers give us. Leading questions as the word suggests can begin to steer the caller in the wrong direction rather than letting them give you the answers you need to help them."

Probing is one of the skills that Shaun was taught in his NHS Pathways training and was able to make more effective with the help of a mentor.

"We had a nurse with us as a mentor after the training. That was very useful and I picked up so many tips on probing. I have suggested that all the new call takers get that."

The majority of calls that Shaun takes are for urgent care and because they call 111 the patient gets to the right place, first time.

"The patients absolutely love that they can get an appointment at an urgent care centre that is suitable for them. Previously they may have gone to hospital, now they just ring this number and we can advise them where to go. Also, if they need transport we can arrange transport for them."

There are still people who dial 999 because they don't know where else to go, and with the help of NHS Pathways they can be directed to the urgent care options which are also available.

"I had a patient calling 999 because they had just moved to the area from Turkey and they were feeling ill. The patient did not speak English so I was able to instantly get an interpreter on the line to help translate for me. Once I had established that the patient had a fever and didn't require an ambulance I was able to explain about 111 and urgent care and book them an appointment

through pathways that was local to them and suitable. Because I was confident I think this came across to the caller.

"This reassured the patient and they were happy with the outcome. I think in this case the patient knew that 999 wasn't the right number to call, but because they were worried and new to the area that was their first reaction."

Shaun has also been trained to take 999 calls. He says the main differences are the urgency and call control as it is more important to get an address and keep the caller calm. He thinks that 111 calls can be more complex and more varied.

Shaun was surprised that NHS Pathways was designed to handle all types of calls and give the same clinical assessment and feels it is the most appropriate way of handling calls. He explains: *"It's a win, win situation because it benefits the patient, the call taker and the service. If you're not sure who to ring it doesn't matter because the assessment is always consistent, and you will get the most appropriate care."*

All call handlers go through an extensive training programme before they can use NHS Pathways to triage calls from 999 or 111 at the North East Ambulance Service. Call handlers have to complete the training and pass the assessments before handling live calls.

Every month call handlers are audited where a random selection of calls are picked and assessed for quality and assurance purposes. Call handlers are given the opportunity to raise any concerns they may have too.

For further information about the training call handlers receive before using NHS Pathways please visit <http://www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/systemsandservices/pathways/training>

"Although you're on a call by yourself you really feel like part of a team. It's been really enjoyable. I feel like I'm making a difference."