Pathology Commissioning Toolkit

Supporting effective commissioning of laboratory medicine
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National Guidance Published
The Department of Health has published a suite of tools to support the commissioning of pathology in the NHS.

The suite includes:

*Aligning diagnostics: strategic guidance for pathology reconfiguration*

*The Pathology Commissioning Toolkit*

The suite offers end-to-end support for pathology commissioning, from strategic planning to contract monitoring.

Supporting commissioning in pathology has been an important thread in the Department’s work since a commitment made in response to Lord Carter’s Independent Review of NHS Pathology.

The publication of consolidated guidance is seen as a timely intervention for a number of reasons:

- the transition to new commissioning arrangements creates a new cadre of commissioners who will welcome accessible and appropriate guidance
- rapid developments in the NHS and private sector pathology make it essential that commissioners are positioned to manage the market and realise their own commissioning intentions
- the QIPP opportunities available in pathology cannot be realised without the active co-operation of providers and commissioners
- the broad trend from hospital to community care raises new challenges for direct access (community-requested) pathology

National pathology programme

At the guidance launch workshop, Ian Barnes (National Clinical Director for Pathology) gave an overview of the landscape of NHS pathology and of the pathology programme of the Department of Health.

Ian Barnes noted that the programme of consolidation called for by Lord Carter has made great strides: the number of independent NHS laboratories has halved since the time of the Independent Review. This consolidation has come about as a result of a mixed economy, driven by the efforts of both providers and commissioners and with the active partnership of the private sector.

His own programme has developed into a mainstream contributor to QIPP goals. On **quality**, the Department has published commissioning tools, released a national service specification, shared KPIs, and is developing the National Laboratory Medicine catalogue.

On **productivity**, collaboration with NHS Improvement has seen excellent work across a number of key disciplines.

*Innovations* have been supported or publicised by the Department, including changes to pathways, access to expert pathology advice, and patient self-management.

The outstanding challenge for the coming months is to document and address the variation in pathology testing, particularly in primary care, and to improve the uptake of NICE guidance. This work will follow the holistic approach advocated by the DH Right Care programme.

The key to all of this is a shift in the paradigm of pathology from a testing service to a clinical knowledge service.
Strategic Guidance

Aligning diagnostics: strategic guidance for pathology reconfiguration, published by PCC on behalf of the Department of Health, is aimed at both providers and commissioners. It is designed to support their conversation and co-operation and to improve the use of pathology in the NHS as a whole.

For pathology providers, it is designed to enhance the understanding of the commissioning agenda, and to help providers to identify activity and innovation that will be valued by commissioners and service users.

For commissioners, it is designed to provide a whole-system overview of pathology and the role that it can play in securing improving health outcomes at population level. In particular, it provides analytical approaches enabling commissioners to evaluate the quality of the service they are currently securing, and to prioritise areas for development and enhancement. In this way, the document supports commissioners as they develop their strategic commissioning intentions and manage the market in the medium to long term.

Both directly and indirectly through the activity of commissioners, the document will stimulate the market to provide the kind of pathology services that the NHS needs in the era of QIPP and empowered patients.

At the guidance launch workshop, delegates noted the usefulness of the document as a short, accessible learning tool for commissioners, in particular for clinicians moving into influential commissioning roles in CCGs.

The guidance is available here.
Pathology Commissioning Toolkit
The Pathology Commissioning Toolkit, produced by NHS East of England on behalf of the Department of Health, is aimed at practising commissioners.

It picks up where the Strategic Guidance leaves off, and supports a reconfiguration of pathology services, once the goals of such a reconfiguration have been identified in line with the Strategic Guidance.

The toolkit consists of:

- an introduction and overview
- 11 steps, from outline business case to contract management, from current state to completed reconfiguration
- 28 tools, consisting of detailed templates and exemplar material supporting each of the 11 steps

The complete toolkit will be appropriate for a community that has decided to use a procurement route to secure reconfigured or respecified pathology services, particularly "direct access" services supporting community and primary care. Many of the individual tools relate to specific steps in a standard procurement process. However, elements within the toolkit will also support renegotiation of an existing contract. In particular, the quality- and outcomes-oriented service specification provides a strong basis for this, or to act as a schedule in a larger acute services contract.

At the launch workshop, delegates noted the broad applicability of the tools and the overall approach to a wide range of commissioning contexts.

The toolkit is available [here](#).

Questions and answers
At the launch workshop, the closing discussion ranged widely over the changed context for pathology following the Health Act 2012.

Future trends would involve significant changes to the micro-economics of pathology. There is a need to move away from silo budgets and integrate spending on diagnostics more tightly with the costs of the overall pathway. This will encourage the correct attribution of the benefits of savings achieved through changes to access or test selection. CQUINs provide an additional incentive where the market is not adjusting sufficiently.

Such changes are likely to lead to the lengthening of contracts, in order to allow both commissioners and providers to realise the benefits of innovation and investment.

Understanding market pressures and trends will be very important in a changing structural and institutional environment. The current signals from the Department is that pathology will be a locally-specified service, and the National Commissioning board has yet to determine its approach. Likewise Monitor is currently determining its overall role.

In such a fluid situation nationally, it is local drivers that will determine outcomes. The formation and development of Foundation Trusts, CCGs, and the competitive market which they will jointly create alongside the independent sector, will be the most significant factors in the immediate future of pathology.