

Simon Stevens
Chief Executive
NHS England
Skipton House
London SE1 6LH

16th November 2015

Dear Simon,

I am writing to you concerning the future of three key developments in neurology that arose from the recommendations made in the Public Accounts Committee (PAC)'s review of neurological services in 2012. These are: the appointment of a National Clinical Director (NCD) for neurology within NHS England; the creation of strategic clinical networks (SCNs) with responsibility for neurology; and the formation of the Neurology Intelligence Network (NIN). Each of these initiatives has had a significant impact and we ask for your assurance that they will continue to be funded and supported by NHS England in future.

There is a widespread perception that neurology services are not seen as a priority by the NHS, as stated explicitly by David Nicholson in his evidence to the PAC in 2012. At a time when the latest data shows major issues with neurology services, this laissez-faire attitude can no longer be acceptable. Our recent patient experience survey showed that 58% of patients with neurological conditions have experienced problems in accessing the services or treatment they need, while 40% wait over 12 months for a diagnosis. Recent NIN data shows that service availability remains highly variable across the country, with 22% of CCGs offering no local access to a consultant whatsoever. In this context it is vital that the important developments made over the last two years are retained and strengthened, and their achievements built on, rather than wasted.

National Clinical Director

Since Dr David Bateman's appointment as NCD in 2013, he has provided much-needed strategic leadership for neurology at the national level, finally giving it a level of strategic representation within NHS England that is comparable with other condition groupings. He has been instrumental in developing and coordinating the work plans of the NIN and SCN. As Co-Chair of the Clinical Reference Group for Neurosciences he has helped develop new commissioning policies and continues to push for clarification of responsibilities around commissioning specialised neurology services. He also proposed NHS England's current project scoping neurology community care services.

Dr Bateman's leadership has provided advice, direction, coordination and focus to a wide range of projects which have the potential to make a very real impact on the experiences and outcomes for patients living with neurological conditions. At a time when major changes are proposed which are likely to have significant effects on neurology, such as the introduction of collaborative commissioning, this leadership more valuable than ever. The removal or demotion of the NCD post would suggest that neurology is once again being treated as lowest-priority. We believe it is essential that the role of NCD for neurology is retained in the future.

Neurology Intelligence Network

In the short period of time since its establishment in 2014, the NIN has become a vital source of data and intelligence on neurological conditions. Prior to this, there was no central data resource for neurology in the NHS, leading the PAC to note that "The Department (of Health) lacks the data to measure the effectiveness of services for people with neurological conditions".

The data and analysis produced by the NIN so far, in collaboration with patient representatives and clinical experts, have made a major contribution to filling the information gap affecting neurology services and outcomes. For example, its recent data release on access to outpatient services across the country has revealed huge regional and local variations in access services and outcomes. The NIN's outputs enable CCGs to assess their own performance against comparable areas and allow patients hold services to account.

We understand that the future of the NIN is under threat as it has received no funding commitment from either Public Health England or NHS England beyond 2015-16. At a time when the value of good data and intelligence as a tool for scrutiny and improvement is widely accepted, it cannot be acceptable for neurology services to operate in an information vacuum. We urge you to work with Public Health England to find a sustainable funding solution to allow the work of the NIN to continue.

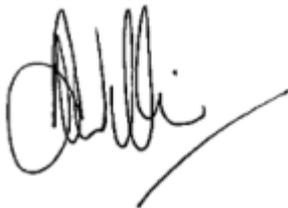
Strategic Clinical Networks for neurology

The SCNs for neurology act as an important source of guidance and advice for commissioners and providers, and coordinate regional service improvement initiatives. They have played a central role in addressing service fragmentation by producing a range of pathway guidance and advice to local commissioners and providers. They have come together nationally with the support of the NCD to develop the first measurable and auditable benchmark standards for neurology care in hospitals, and will also be leading the NHS England's project on community care services in neurology.

The SCNs' ability to connect stakeholders across system boundaries makes them best-placed to address issues of pathway integration, which is crucial for complex neurological conditions requiring a wide range of services. For many voluntary sector organisations in particular, the SCNs also provide an opportunity to engage with the new NHS improvement architecture. We believe that the SCNs are central to neurology service improvement and we call on you to ensure that NHS England will maintain sufficient funding and support for the SCNs.

In conclusion, we hope you will agree that the three initiatives mentioned above have amply demonstrated their value and their effectiveness over the last two years. Cutting these important initiatives would reinforce the perception of neurology as low-priority and potentially undo much of the progress that has been achieved since the PAC's 2012 report. We therefore call on you to publicly affirm NHS England's ongoing commitment to supporting the NCD, SCNs and the NIN in the future.

Yours sincerely,



Arlene Wilkie
Chief Executive
Neurological Alliance

cc Professor Bruce Keogh
Dr Martin McShane