

NICE - National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

An overview of NICE's role in the UK

Many people are used to reading about NICE in the media, usually in the context of the availability of new medications. By understanding how NICE works patients and relatives can see what role they can play within its processes to ensure NICE makes appropriate decisions to ensure that options are available.

About NICE

NICE stands for The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence and is responsible for providing national guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention and treatment of ill health. It is an independent organisation. It was set up in 1999 to evaluate medications, treatments and procedures and decide whether they should be available on the NHS in England and Wales. It is important to remember that Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate organisations to make these decisions.

The aim of NICE is to determine which medications, treatments and procedures are clinically effective and cost effective and to ensure people have equal access to them, regardless of where they live. This process was intended to do away with the 'postcode lottery', which denied drugs or treatments to patients on the basis of where they lived.

What NICE does

NICE has two main functions:

1. To provide guidance on the NHS's use of specific new treatments following clinical and cost-effective assessments called Single Technology Appraisals (STAs).
2. To provide guidelines on how particular conditions (eg Atrial Fibrillation) should be

managed in the NHS (including all aspects of care from prevention and diagnosis to treatment and follow-up care).

In making a decision, NICE considers whether a treatment benefits patients, will help the NHS meet its targets (for example, by improving heart disease rates) or provides value for money (is cost effective). Once NICE issues guidance, NHS trusts and primary care organisations are **required** to make the drugs or treatments available.

In making a decision NICE asks for expert opinion and scientific evidence from medical and other health professionals (such as senior consultants in their field), patients and patient organisations (such as the AFA, which is why your views and experiences are so important to us!) and industry.

How NICE works

The Department of Health (for England) and the National Assembly for Wales decide what medications, treatments and procedures should be submitted to NICE. However, anyone can suggest a topic for NICE to review by simply logging on to the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk). The website also lists the topics (such as new guidance on treating a particular condition) that NICE is currently considering, as well as the different ways patients, carers and members of the public can get involved in the process, either by serving on a committee or submitting their opinion on a particular topic.

NICE divides its guidance into three main areas: health technology (specific medicines, treatments and procedures), clinical practice (how doctors and nurses should treat particular conditions) and public health (preventing illness and health promotion).

NICE makes its decisions based on:

Evidence – NICE reviews each new treatment or technique.

Cost effectiveness – including the QALY measure (Quality Adjusted Life Year), a way of comparing the benefits of different treatments to determine value for money.

Contributions – expert opinion received from patient organisations, health professionals, experts and other interested parties.

All medications need a licence before they can be prescribed. NICE usually begins to evaluate a drug after it receives a licence. To speed up the availability of new treatments, NICE now has a fast-track procedure and may start to evaluate a medication or treatment before it actually receives a licence. This means they can make a decision very quickly after a licence has been granted. As soon as guidance from NICE is published, the medication or treatment should be made available on the NHS, although your doctor will use their judgement and experience to decide what is best for you.

Access to medications before NICE guidance

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Authority (MHRA) is the body that decides whether to license a medication or treatment. Once a drug has been licensed, your doctor can prescribe it for you, as long as your local NHS Primary Health Care Trust agrees to pay for it.

Once NICE has issued guidance on a medication, treatment or procedure to core people (NHS Chief Executives and local government organisations) this must be followed by local trusts.

Getting medications that NICE has approved

If you think you have been denied a drug or treatment approved by NICE, your first port of call should be your doctor. They will ensure that the particular therapy is appropriate for your condition.

The NICE website includes patient versions of its guidance, which outline clearly for whom the new treatment is intended.

It is important to remember that NICE guidance does not replace the knowledge and skills of individual health professionals who treat patients; it is still up to them to make decisions about a particular patient.

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