National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

Science, Evidence and Analytics (SEA) progress report

This report provides an update on key issues and developments in the Science, Evidence and Analytics directorate in the period January and February 2021.

Summary of activity

A summary of the work of the teams is described below:

The Information Resources team provided information expertise and searches for the development of 71 NICE products, produced 13 current awareness bulletins, sourced 454 documents and provided information skills training to 26 NICE staff.

We have started the process of setting up an Office for Digital Health. We are working closely with NHSX, MHRA and others, and have received funding from NHSX to 1) develop an evidence standard framework for AI technologies, and 2) to explore setting up an innovative regulation and access pathway for data-driven technologies.

We have been successful in our application for NIHR/UKRI research funds on Long COVID, as part of a research consortium led by UCL, to use real world evidence to inform our guidance generation and to trial new ways to drive uptake of the guidance by embedding it in the electronic health record.

We are working with CHTE, NHS England and NHS Improvement and DHSC to develop and test innovative models that pay companies for antimicrobials. We are also working closely with the MHRA to develop the joint Innovative Licensing and Access Pathway.

Notable issues and developments

Ongoing response to COVID-19

The information services team continues to support the trial tracking, systematic literature searching activity, document supply and copyright advice that underpins development of NICE guidance on all COVID-19 topics across NICE and supports the surveillance and monitoring processes to ensure these guidelines are kept up to date.

NICE were part of the successful consortium for £9m research funding on Long Covid from UKRI/NIHR, to help inform and drive adoption of our guideline on management of the long-term effects of COVID-19. Working with scientists at Oxford University, LSHTM, UCL and others we will use real world data from primary care EHRs and from several national longitudinal cohort studies to inform our guideline in close to real time, and monitor data on adoption. We will also work with primary care record suppliers, to trial embedding alerts around our guideline in the electronic health record systems, to drive further adoption. Our part of the funding will be used to support data scientists working between NICE and academia, using the new OpenSafely platform to access primary care data in a safe and secure way.

Other developments

Office for Digital Health

The SEA Directorate has begun work to set up a new Office for Digital Health within NICE. This dedicated new team, which represents a key element of our emerging strategy, will be based within the SEA Directorate but working closely with CHTE and other directorates to coordinate all NICE’s activities on digital health, both internally and externally, across Government, ALBs and Industry. A marketing and communications plan has been developed to launch the new office from March 2021 with an initial focus on developing joint working relationships with NHSX and the MHRA, navigating NICE’s relationship with key stakeholders nationally and internationally, improving the intelligence and collaborations that will inform the NICE topic selection programme and ensuring NICE’s outputs and methods align with a digital market.

In January, NICE provided an update on its digital health activities at an NHSX CEO roundtable event, alongside an update on the developing regulatory environment led by the MHRA. Following the success of this, the team submitted two business cases to the NHSX AI Fund for additional funds to commence two new projects from April 2021. The first project is to develop the NICE Evidence Standards Framework for Digital Health Technologies to incorporate evidence standards for data driven technologies that incorporate adaptive algorithms. The second project, working jointly with the MHRA, is to scope an innovative regulation and access pathway for data driven technologies from regulation through to market access, drawing on the medicines work. Both business cases were approved in February and preparatory work/recruitment has now started.

NICE Listens

Following Board approval in November 2020, our new deliberative public engagement workstream, ‘NICE Listens’, is progressing well. After liaising with senior management and relevant teams across the Institute, health inequalities were chosen as the first topic to take forward through the topic selection and scoping process. A project proposal is being developed with the input of NICE’s Health Inequalities Oversight group, the CHTE methods review, and related methods research in the Centre for Guidelines. A literature review of previous deliberative engagement work is underway, and we are actively engaging with external stakeholders to understand existing work in this area. The proposal will be presented to the Executive Team for sign-off in Spring 2021.

Supporting Innovation in Life Sciences

NICE and MHRA have been collaborating closely on the new Innovative Licensing and Access Pathway (ILAP) that was formally launched on 1 January. Current work is focused on the development of operational arrangements for ILAP. An ILAP Steering Group has been established with membership from MHRA, NICE and Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC). The first Innovation Passport designation has been awarded by the ILAP partners. There has been very high early interest in ILAP from life sciences companies, the press, and stakeholders. Further work to establish ILAP is being driven through a series of work packages being delivered jointly by MHRA, NICE and SMC.

NICE is working with NHS England and NHS Improvement and DHSC to develop and test innovative models that pay companies for antimicrobials based primarily on a health technology assessment of their value to the NHS, as opposed to the volumes used.  Such purchasing models should lead to more predictable payments to companies based on value and have the potential to achieve much-needed pull incentives for increased investment in antimicrobial product development. Following scoping workshops in January and further engagements with the companies and the DHSC Economic Evaluation Policy Research Unit (EEPRU), the final scopes have now been published and the product evaluation stage started.

International HTA collaboration

NICE is involved in strategic discussions with international HTA agencies about collaboration opportunities. The remit of our ongoing collaboration with SMC (Scotland), PBAC (Australia) and CADTH (Canada) has been expanded from COVID-19 to include other health technologies. Initial exchanges have taken place to identify specific collaboration opportunities in digital health. We are also working with HAS (France), IQWiG (Germany) and ZIN (Netherlands) to identify opportunities for collaborative activity. We are part of discussions as a EUnetHTA consortia partner about how the network can continue after May 2021 when the EUnetHTA project ends and the objectives of such a network.

Making best use of NHS data

The SEA directorate team is engaged in the work of the Data Alliance Partnership, the forthcoming Data Strategy for Health and Social Care and the Goldacre Review, to make sure the national approach to accessing and using NHS data meets NICE's needs, including access to real world data and supporting contingent approval of new technologies. The Data Alliance Partnership is a new initiative convened by NHSX bringing together key bodies such as the Care Quality Commission, NHS Digital, Public Health England and NICE, to agree principles on data collection, sharing and use to minimise the burden of data collection and processing. The Goldacre review is focusing on the more efficient and safe use of health data for research and analysis for the benefit of patients and the healthcare sector.

Key Risks

Core risks for SEA remain ensuring sufficient resourcing and expertise for rapid delivery of our work on digital health and data and analytics. We have been able to mitigate this, in part, with new external funding from both UKRI/NIHR and NHSX to fund specific pieces of work - although recruiting for the roles may be competitive.

Overall Direction

The SEA directorate continues to develop momentum in the delivery of its programmes of work - strengthened by new external funding and academic partnerships. The challenge for the next phase will be to increase our own capacity, strengthened the joint working model across NICE, and to create deeper partnerships with academia and across government.

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March 2021