

## NHS Direct, UK – NHS Direct Online (NHSDO) information service

NHS Direct is a special health authority within the UK National Health Services (NHS), and has two divisions. NHS Direct Call Centres focus on symptomatic response to users and only to a certain extent on delivering health and healthcare information services. The NHS Direct Online (NHSDO) division has other priorities – it provides mainly information services, and a limited symptomatic service. NHSDO relies on part of the call centres resources to support its web site activities. This can be seen as similar to a modern business setting, where web sites offer visitors an option to telephone a call centre if they need additional support.

NHSDO was developed in 1998 to provide citizens and healthcare professionals with access to information about health and healthcare via the Internet. It is a web portal offering citizens information to help them to understand health and healthcare issues relevant to them, and to indicate the potential benefits they may gain from change. As for the call centres, NHSDO also enables citizens to make better choices about their use of the NHS healthcare services.

It is a service in addition, and complementary to, the NHS Direct call centres. Both NHSDO and the NHS Direct call centres are 24 hour services that provide healthcare information to users. Some NHSDO users may not find all they want or need on NHSDO's web pages, and may want further help or clarification after using NHSDO, and so may rely on the NHS Direct call centre service. The subject of this case study is this wider range of the NHSDO service and its estimated share of call centre resources.

With NHS Direct, citizens can phone the NHS Direct number and their enquiries are answered by an operator. The operators are aided by a decision support programme. With NHSDO, citizens go online and look themselves for the information they need. There are no phone calls, waiting time for a free operator, or the trouble of finding a GP on duty at out-of-office hours. These options are still available if citizens need them. This process may not apply to emergencies, but rather to more routine enquiries like advice in case of stomach-ache or minor household injuries. Visitors to NHSDO enter either through the general NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)), or directly



via [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk).

The address [www.nhsdirect.co.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.co.uk) also provides access. By following the relevant links and inserting required information, users are guided to the information they are seeking.

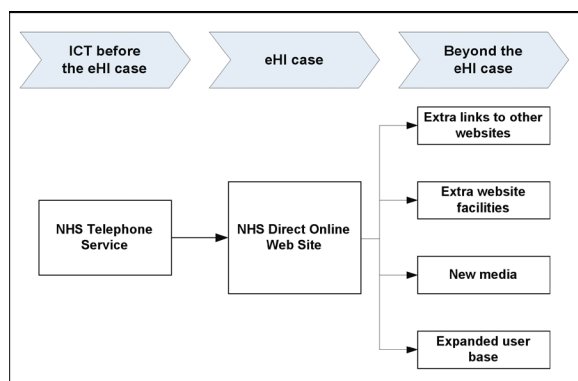
The NHSDO web portal enables users to improve their knowledge and choices about life styles, nutrition, health, healthcare, self-treatment, healthcare services in their region etc. Information is provided by access to a range of facilities, including a health information enquiry service; a health encyclopaedia; a best treatments website, self-help guide; details of local NHS services, common health questions, interactive tools and an interactive health space.

The number of visitors to NHSDO has risen dramatically from about 1.5 million in 2000 to the forecast of some 24 million for 2008. The number of repeat visitors has risen too, from about one-third of visits to about half.

The continuous investment totals approximately € 22m in the period 2000-2008. Annual running costs increase over the period to some € 12m in 2008. Yet these are exceeded by the benefits already in the third year of operation. Net economic benefits rise to approximately € 112m in 2008. Although the obvious tangible impact is the service to the citizens, the main benefit is the avoided costs of providing the same level of access to the same quantity and quality of information. This explains why over 85% of the benefits are observed to be for NHS Direct, leaving about 13% of direct gain for the citizens.



**FIGURE: THE EHEALTH DYNAMIC OF NHS DIRECT ONLINE**



**Core impact:**

- Citizens are enabled to use health and healthcare information to make choices about lifestyles
- Citizens are empowered to rely more on self help and avoid some visits to GPs for information
- Costs of the workforce needed for an alternative technology with call centres are avoided
- Reduced number of visits to healthcare professionals triggered by need for health information.

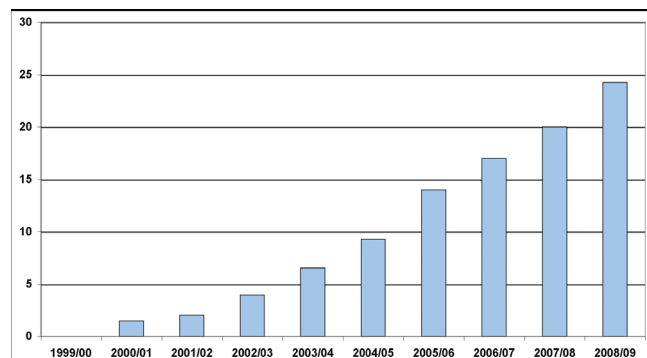
**Main beneficiaries:**

- Citizens through improved health and healthcare information
- NHS Direct with a lower-cost option.

**Lessons learned:**

- When providing a new service to citizens, use the technology that citizens are increasingly using
- Focusing on citizens and providing them with health and healthcare information empowers them to take more informed decisions and choices
- • Obtain external support in the earlier years, but for the running service rely on an internal team
- • The eHealth dynamic of such a service is a continuous chain of developments to add more functions
- • Do not use patient empowerment as an aim to reduce spending on healthcare, but to improve quality of services.

**CHART: NUMBER OF NHS DIRECT ONLINE VISITS PER YEAR**



**Economic results:**

- First year of annual net benefit, i.e. when annual benefits exceed annual costs: 2001, year 3
- Estimated annual net benefit for the year 2008: approximately 110 million
- First year of cumulative net benefit: 2002, year 4
- Estimated cumulative benefit by 2008: approximately 550 million
- Cumulative investment costs, including operating expenditure, by 2008: approximately 100 million
- Estimated productivity gain, measured in decrease in cost per online visit: 85%
- Distribution of benefits to 2008: Citizens – 13%; NHS Direct – 87%

[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

[www.ehealth-impact.org/case\\_studies/index\\_en.htm](http://www.ehealth-impact.org/case_studies/index_en.htm)