Safe and sustainable neurosurgical review
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“…..pressures have come to bear on the delivery of small volume, high risk, high cost specialties which raise questions on how best to cost-effectively deliver these services in the future. The lack of a national strategy for paediatric neurosurgery coupled with financial concerns over the viability of local paediatric neurosurgical services, concerns over the volume of work required for training and revalidation, the effect of the European Working Time Regulation on man-power issues and the need for equity of access to a high quality service lead to the conclusion that it is now timely to reconsider how best to offer paediatric neurosurgical services within a national framework……. there is increasing evidence that to achieve best results in clinical practice, patients should be treated by multidisciplinary specialist teams working in high volume units with access to the appropriate diagnostic and treatment facilities.”

In 2009, a letter from Sir Bruce Keogh stated: “I am writing to follow up on the article ……. and express my support for the National Specialised Commissioning Group’s (NSCG) progress with this work. I am keen to ensure delivery and implementation of a clinically-led solution for Safe and Sustainable paediatric neurosurgical services for England …..”.

The ‘Safe and Sustainable’ process was led by the NSCG and covered both Paediatric Neurosurgery and Cardiac Surgery with the mission statement: Safe, sustainable and world class. Not ordinary, OK or just good enough. Children and young people who need surgery must have excellent care.

The reviews are led on behalf of the 10 Specialised Commissioning Groups and their constituent Primary Care Trusts. “Ensuring excellent care for children and young people is one of the NHS’s highest priorities. In the field of children’s neurosurgery, the extremely complicated and specialised nature of this work makes achieving this especially challenging. In order to ensure the best outcomes for children who need neurosurgery, surgeons in the field and other clinicians have called for a review of how we deliver these neurological services to children in England.”

The review aims to deliver a national service that:

- Has an agreed set of national standards and a model of care to ensure the very best care for all children needing neurosurgery
- Will ensure a balance between the need for convenient treatment locations for patients and their families, and the need for very specialist high quality surgery
- Delivers an expert workforce well equipped to handle the specific issues surrounding children’s neurological surgery
- Has specialist neurosurgery centres in which expert surgeons are encouraged to collaborate on research into future treatments and clinical development
- Can provide the specialised support services that children often require following surgery
- Supports the development of children’s services for cancer and trauma and rehabilitation, as well as other conditions such as epilepsy and spina bifida - all complex conditions requiring different expert multi-disciplinary professional skills

The review was requested because of concerns amongst neurosurgeons and other clinicians that existing models of care and configuration of services did not allow some children to receive the best possible care. Neurosurgeons were also concerned that current services were not sustainable for the future requirements and developments in this field. Other aims were:

- Reviewing current arrangements for children’s neurosurgical services including levels of need and activity in each of the 14 centres in England
- Developing formal criteria to ensure children’s neurosurgical services meet specific standards and national demand
• Developing a national model of care
• Seeking the views of stakeholders on the future shape of children’s neurosurgical services

By 2013, the process had delivered a model of care within networks of paediatric neuroscience and about to be published standards commented on by professional organisations and patients and the public. Networks have defined geographical boundaries with organisational links and appropriate governance and leadership; will develop formal links with major trauma networks, 24/7 rotas for Consultant Paediatric Neurosurgeons across the network, real time image transfer within the network, agreed outcome measures and data collection that all services will collect.

Future work from 2013 will show a transfer of the work to ‘Operational Delivery Networks’ nd the Paediatric Neuroscience ‘Clinical Reference Group’ (CRG) working to the National Commissioning Board of NHS England. CRGs are responsible for providing the NHS CB with clinical advice regarding specialised services, and for the delivery of key ‘products’, such as service specifications and commissioning policies, which enable the NHS CB to commission services from specialist service providers through the contracting arrangements overseen by its Area Teams. CRGs are driven by a commitment to ensure equity across specialised services. CRGs are also at the forefront of the drive to spearhead innovation and taking action to improve patient experience and outcomes in the NHS.

It is hoped that the above processes will improve the wide variation in the process and outcomes of care for children with severe traumatic brain injury (and other paediatric neurosurgical conditions) quoted in the 2012 Safe and Sustainable Steering Group Report:
• 1 in 10 admissions for children to an intensive care unit with traumatic brain injury has a fatal outcome
• Outcomes vary considerably across England and Wales for severe cases (8.1% to 18.8%)
• Internationally, lower mortality rates have been demonstrated for children with traumatic brain injury treated in paediatric trauma centres than for those treated in adult trauma centres