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UK Industry Urges Policy Makers To Help People Towards Digital Self-Care Services

by [David Ridley](#)

For Self-Care Week, the UK's PAGB publishes results from its Digital Self-Care Audit, and makes recommendations for the country's policy makers to help people find better self-care information online and through self-care apps via the NHS.

In the wake of the coronavirus, the UK consumer healthcare industry association, PAGB, is urging UK policy makers to help consumers find good quality information about how to self-care and use self-care apps where appropriate.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the digitalization of healthcare services can happen at pace and scale when required,” the PAGB said. “Now, more than ever, it is vital that online self-care information and advice is clear and accessible, and digital tools are used to enhance this access.”

The PAGB’s “call to action” is based on the results of a “Digital self-care audit,” published for UK Self-Care Week (16-22 November).

This document makes recommendations for how recent advancements across digital platforms and remote services during the pandemic can be harnessed to lock-in a longer-term shift towards self-care.

Three Recommendations

Analyzing the quality and accessibility of online platforms and apps commonly used by UK consumers during the pandemic, the PAGB makes three recommendations for how these resources can be harnessed to “lock-in a longer-term shift towards self-care.”

Firstly, the PAGB found that there is no central hub for self-care information on national UK National Health Service websites or apps.

Of the all the websites reviewed by the association, only 37 directed users to national NHS websites for additional information on self-care.

Furthermore, while self-care advice is available on the NHS.uk website and the NHS App, users must navigate an alphabetized list of conditions and treatments to locate relevant information on self-care, the PAGB pointed out.

“There is an opportunity to establish a central, trusted source of advice available to both the public and healthcare professionals,” the PAGB concluded.

NHS England should, therefore, develop a self-care section in the NHS App and on the NHS website, the association recommended.

These dedicated self-care resources should include “fact sheets, such as those from the Self Care Forum, and easy to understand advice on the likely duration of symptoms, what ‘normal’ symptoms to expect, red-flag symptoms for which medical attention should be sought, and treatment options and how to access them,” it added.

Secondly, looking at the NHS Apps Library, the PAGB found that the apps recommended by the service only cover self-care for long-term conditions, not self-treatable conditions or minor ailments.

“When searching for ‘self-care’ in the NHS Apps Library, six apps are returned, all of which are to support the management of long-term conditions such as asthma, COPD and diabetes,” the association reported. “However, from our audit we know that there are more apps out there that do support self-care for self-treatable conditions and broader health and wellbeing.”

NHS Review

Based on its findings, the PAGB recommended a “review of existing and new self-care apps to encourage consistent roll out across the country.”

“An NHS review of these apps, alongside an update to the NHS Apps Library search algorithm, would help signpost more people towards these trusted sources and ensure consistency in the quality of advice available to the public on self-care,” the association said.

Finally, the PAGB discovered a “lack of consistency” in how patients are “triaged” by general practitioners (GP) towards pharmacies where appropriate.

Out of the 25 GP practices reviewed, 12 referred or directed patients towards pharmacy care, the association noted.

Of those practices, only seven utilized NHS England's UK pharmacy finder tool or linked to the NHS.uk website, it continued, and two provided named local pharmacies on their website.

During the pandemic, digital health services provided clear and consistent messaging around the management of coronavirus symptoms, signposting users to the appropriate service," the PAGB noted.

Learning from this experience, the PAGB recommended that there should be "improvements in digital triaging routes, so that people are referred to self-care, where it is the appropriate solution."

Industry Leads

Reflecting on the results of the audit, PAGB CEO Michelle Riddalls said that the UK consumer healthcare industry was "rooted in science and evidence, with rigorous standards and a commitment to prioritizing consumer safety above all else."

"That goes hand in hand with supporting access to reliable information about self-care through brand advertising and product websites and apps," Riddalls told HBW Insight.

"That's why," she added, "on behalf of our members, we're urging policymakers to take steps that will signpost people more easily towards quality-assured online advice about self-care and self-care apps when that's the most appropriate choice for them."