

# POLICY ON THE USE OF MOBILE COMMUNICATION DEVICES IN HEALTHCARE PREMISES

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1. Mobile Phones can be essential in the healthcare environment for good patient management.
- 1.2 The electromagnetic interference produced by such equipment may have the potential to affect medical devices.
- 1.3 This can be a particular problem when mobile phones are brought into a healthcare environment and used by staff, patients and visitors in an uncontrolled manner.
- 1.4 The potential nuisance (as a result of uncontrolled noise pollution) should also be considered, therefore, some restrictions may be required to minimise both the risk of interference with medical equipment and to protect the overall patient healthcare environment.
- 1.5 The integration of camera devices with modern mobile phones also presents new challenges which must be addressed, see para 10.1.

## 2.0 Aim of the policy

- 2.1 To ensure that the use of mobile phones within NHS Lothian premises complies with current national guidance (see evidence base para 5.0). The guidance takes account of developments in mobile communication technology and the growing communication needs of patients, visitors and staff.
- 2.2 To inform staff that a total ban on the use of mobile phones in healthcare premises is no longer considered appropriate assuming the guidance contained within this policy document is followed.
- 2.3 To provide guidance on the selection of specific areas where patients, visitors and staff can use their mobile communications devices, thereby ensuring there is no risk of interference with critical medical equipment.

## 2.4 Summary

In summary, this guidance is produced to ensure;

-That the use of mobile devices (**including mobile phones, GPRS devices, Private Mobile Radio and Tetra/Airwave Radios**) within NHS Lothian premises complies with current national guidance. Note that we have used the term “mobile phones” throughout the document for ease of understanding.

- That staff understand that the reasons for the restrictions on the use of mobile devices in certain areas of the healthcare environment are not solely related to interference with medical equipment.
- That patient confidentiality, privacy and dignity is maintained and to prevent the use of mobile camera phones to take inappropriate photographs and video recordings.
- That mobile devices are not switched on in clinical areas, including wards, unless there are good reasons to do so.
- That areas are established which are designated as suitable areas for mobile communication device use.
- That staff are aware as to areas where the use of mobile devices needs to be restricted.
- That staff are aware of how to assess any potential risk associated with the use of mobile devices in specific areas.
- Compliance with the requirement for NHS organisations to have a written policy regarding the use of mobile devices.

### **3.0 Key objectives**

- 3.1 To ensure that staff understand that the reasons for the restrictions on the use of mobile phones in certain areas of the healthcare environment are not solely related to interference with medical equipment.
- 3.2 To ensure patient confidentiality, privacy and dignity is maintained and to prevent the use of mobile camera phones to take inappropriate photographs and video recordings. (See NHS Lothian Policy on Clinical Photography and Video Recordings of Patients 2008)
- 3.3 To ensure that mobile phones are not switched on in clinical areas, including wards, unless there are good reasons to do so.
- 3.4 To ensure that areas are established which are designated as suitable areas for mobile communication device use. These areas will be those in which issues of privacy and dignity and interference with medical equipment can be kept to a minimum. All areas should be clearly marked with appropriate signage as to whether the use of mobile phones are allowed, or not allowed. (See Section 9)
- 3.5 To ensure compliance with the requirement for NHS organisations to have a written policy regarding the use of mobile phones, including camera phones, stating where and in what circumstances such devices are permitted or prohibited.

#### **4.0 Policy scope**

- 4.1 This policy applies to all staff, visitors, patients and contractors whilst within our premises.

#### **5.0 Evidence base**

- 5.1 The Medical and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) recommendations for use of mobile communications devices are outlined in Appendix 1 for information.
- 5.2 NHS Scotland guidance offers a framework regarding the use of mobile phones and other mobile communication devices. This framework relates to Device Bulletin DB9702 and advice published by the Department of Health (DOH) in July 2004 (reference 2004/0287).
- 5.3 This Guidance is based on information available on the DOH and MHRA websites and further risk assessments carried out by NHS Lothian into particular reported incidents that confirm these were not related to equipment within our organisation.

## **6.0 Staff responsibilities**

- 6.1 It is the responsibility of all staff to ensure that patients, visitors and other staff comply with the policy.
- 6.2 Anyone who does not comply potentially compromises the care of patients.
- 6.3 Action must be taken to avoid such risks. This will include a Ward/Department Manager carrying out a risk assessment and considering whether any restrictions on the use of mobile devices are required.

## **6.4 Patient privacy and dignity**

- 6.4.1 There is a legal duty to respect a patient's private life.
- 6.4.2 The unrestricted use of mobile phones, especially those with camera or recording devices, is unlikely to be compatible with the requirement to maintain patient privacy and dignity.
- 6.4.3 Good practice will restrict the use of such devices to areas where they are unlikely to encroach on the privacy and dignity of the patient.

## **6.5 Patient confidentiality**

- 6.5.1 Given the advanced development of mobile phones, a high number of these devices now include photographic capabilities.
- 6.5.2 This is considered to be high risk in the area of patient confidentiality.
- 6.5.3 Use of a camera phone in patient areas would also likely breach the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA). See also NHS Lothian Policy on Clinical Photography and Video Recordings of Patients 2008 for advice.
- 6.5.4 Good practice will result in NHS Boards taking all possible steps to protect the rights of its patients and staff and avoid any breaches of the DPA where it is able.
- 6.5.5 Restricting the use of mobile phones to areas where they are unlikely to encroach on patient confidentiality will reduce the risk. Additionally, staff should ensure patient confidentiality is maintained by ensuring that conversations are held in appropriate locations, avoiding use in areas where conversations may be overheard.
- 6.5.6 The responsibility to manage this in clinical/patient areas lies directly with the Clinical/Nurse manager for the area concerned and in some cases, where doubt exists, a final decision should be based on the

completion of a risk assessment, using the existing NHS Lothian Risk Assessment process.

## **6.6 Nuisance**

- 6.6.1 It is important to consider that, in a hospital or health service environment; patients may find loud or intrusive ring tones and mobile phone conversations to constitute a nuisance.
- 6.6.2 The use of mobile communications devices can infringe the patients' rights to privacy and dignity and can intrude on their peace and quiet.
- 6.6.3 NHS organisations should promote a stress-free environment which will assist in the recovery of patients.
- 6.6.4 Patients should not be subject to the use by others of mobile phones throughout the day and night.
- 6.6.5 Good practice will result in ensuring that, where the use of mobile phones is permitted, ring tones are switched to low volume, or vibrate or silent mode is enabled on the device.

## **6.7 Interference with medical equipment**

- 6.7.1 The MHRA has stated that "*in certain circumstances, the electromagnetic interference from mobile communication devices can interfere with some medical devices, particularly if used within 2 metres of such devices*", there may be a number of different medical devices within this range of a patients' bedside.
- 6.7.2 Lothian has risk assessed and, although advocating the creation of safe zones, accepts that dangerous interference with our medical devices is very unlikely if mobile phones are 0.5 meters or more away.
- 6.7.3 Additionally, it should be noted that mobile medical equipment (for example mobile syringe drivers) may be brought into a ward or other clinical area, or be in use on a patient being transported to another area. Accordingly, due care should be taken to avoid mobile device usage within 0.5 metres.

## **6.8 Unapproved devices, with resultant health and safety risks**

- 6.8.1 Mobile phones require to be charged via mains power supply.
- 6.8.2 This presents at least two identifiable risks which are:
- an essential medical device may be unplugged to allow the use of a mobile communications device charger;

- mobile communication device chargers may not be PAT (Portable Appliance Tested) tested and may, therefore, constitute an electrical risk.

## **6.9 Confusion with alarms, with resultant health and safety risks**

6.9.1 The variety of mobile communication device ring tones may be confused with medical equipment alarms and signals by staff.

6.9.2 This could result in a genuine alarm being overlooked, with a potential adverse impact on patient safety.

## **7.0 Suggested areas for permitted use of mobile phones in healthcare premises**

7.1 Designated areas for permitted use in Healthcare Premises are likely to include some, or all, of the locations listed below:

- General offices remote from ward and theatre areas;
- Catering department and dining areas;
- Chaplaincy;
- eHealth departments;
- Laboratories;
- Main entrances and all corridors and offices external to ward areas;
- Health records;
- Mortuary;
- Pharmacy;
- Staff changing areas and associated corridors;
- Commercial areas.

7.2 The above list is not intended to be exhaustive, and local, site-specific risk assessments should be carried out to identify areas where the use of mobile devices may be permitted.

7.3 The local site specific risk assessments will be based on the guidance provided within 3.4, using existing NHS Lothian Risk Assessment processes.

## **8.0 Suggested areas for introduction of safe zones and limited use of mobile phones in healthcare premises**

8.1 Designated areas for limiting use in healthcare premises may include some, or all, of the locations listed below subject to appropriate local risk assessment (please see note below):

- Theatre and recovery areas;
- High dependency areas;
- Ward areas.



**NOTE:** While technical evidence indicates that the use of mobile phones in patient/clinical areas constitutes a low risk, patients should expect to be treated in a quiet, peaceful environment. The decision regarding the use of mobile phones in such areas should be the responsibility of the local manager (or similar) who has the responsibility for the care of patients within their area. It may be that a general prohibition is imposed unless there is prior agreement with the local Manager for the use of a mobile communication device. The use of camera phones may also be a particular issue and, as such, prohibition on the grounds of patient confidentiality should be considered. The above list is not intended to be exhaustive, and local, site-specific risk assessments should be carried out to identify areas where the use of mobile phones may be permitted.

## 9.0 Use of mobile phones in healthcare premises

9.1 Areas where the use of mobile phones are permitted should be clearly marked and identified by using the approved signage available from the MHRA website as shown <http://www.mhra.gov.uk>:



Mobile phones  
and GPRS  
systems can be  
used in this area

9.2 In general, if a patient, staff member, or visitor cannot see a sign permitting the use of mobile phones, it should be assumed that their use is prohibited.

9.3 The prohibition sign shown below should be used in areas where it is inappropriate to use these devices:



Switch off all  
mobile phones and  
GPRS systems

These may interfere with  
nearby medical equipment

- 9.4 Consideration in using mobile phones is important even in permitted areas and, as a matter of courtesy, calls should be made by moving away from patients or others who may be disturbed.
- 9.5 Whilst the prohibition on the use of mobile phones in healthcare buildings is being lifted, this does not imply that people should freely use such devices.
- 9.6 Patients, visitors and staff have a right to expect a quiet, peaceful environment in all NHS Scotland premises and users of mobile communications devices must respect this.
- 9.7 There may be a small risk of mobile phones interfering with the operation of medical equipment and, therefore, staff, visitors and patients should temporarily relocate to an area designated as being 'safe' for the use of mobile phones.

## **10.0 Use of camera telephones and other related devices**

- 10.1 Allowing digital imaging via mobile phones has the potential to create issues of patient confidentiality and patient consent. (See NHS Lothian Policy on Confidentiality of Personal Health Information 2008 and NHS Lothian Draft Consent Policy 2009)
- 10.2 Photographs should only be taken with the consent of all parties likely to be identified in the photograph and in keeping with local and national policies. i.e. NHS Lothian Policy on Clinical Photography and Video Recordings of Patients 2008

## **11.0 Health risks of mobile phones**

- 11.1 Radio waves emitted above certain levels can cause heating effects on the body.
- 11.2 Guidelines are set to ensure exposure is kept below any damaging levels and all UK mobile phones meet this standard.
- 11.3 There are, however, significant gaps in our knowledge about the long-term effects and, as such, we should always use a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phones.
- 11.4 In order to reduce any personal risk by minimising exposure to radio waves, you should:
- use mobile phones for essential purposes only;
  - keep calls short.
- 11.5 Further information can be found by contacting the Department of Health via their website at [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk).

## **12.0 Adverse incident reporting**

- 12.1 Any concerns about interference or breaches of confidentiality, privacy, or other NHS Lothian policies must be reported through the Organisation's Incident Reporting Procedures.

**Appendix 1**

| <b>Risk of interference</b> | <b>Type of communication system</b>  | <b>Recommendation</b>   |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| <b>High*</b>                | Analogue emergency service radios.   | Use in hospitals only in an emergency, never for routine communication.   |
|                             | Private business radios (PBRs) and PMR446.e.g. porters' and maintenance staff radios (two-way radios).<br><br>A new Policy is underway to address separately how we control MCDs. In future, cross reference will be required when referring to the mobile phone issues. | Minimise risks by changing to alternative lower risk technologies where appropriate, or following risk assessment introduce procedures to ensure that these devices are switched off  |
| <b>Medium</b>               | Cellphones (mobile phones). TETRA (Terrestrial Trunked Radio System). Laptop computers, palmtops and gaming devices fitted with higher power wireless networks such as GPRS and 3G.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A total ban on these systems is not required and is impossible to enforce effectively.</li> <li>• Should be switched off or should not encroach near critical care or life support medical equipment (near defined as &lt; 500mm).</li> <li>• Should be used only in designated areas.</li> <li>• Authorised health and social care staff and external service personnel should always comply with local rules regarding use.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Low</b>                  | Cordless telephones (including DECT). Low power computer wireless networks such as RLAN systems and Bluetooth.   | These systems are very unlikely to cause interference under most circumstances and need not be restricted.  |

\* Guidance on the management of such equipment within healthcare premises will be provided under separate cover.