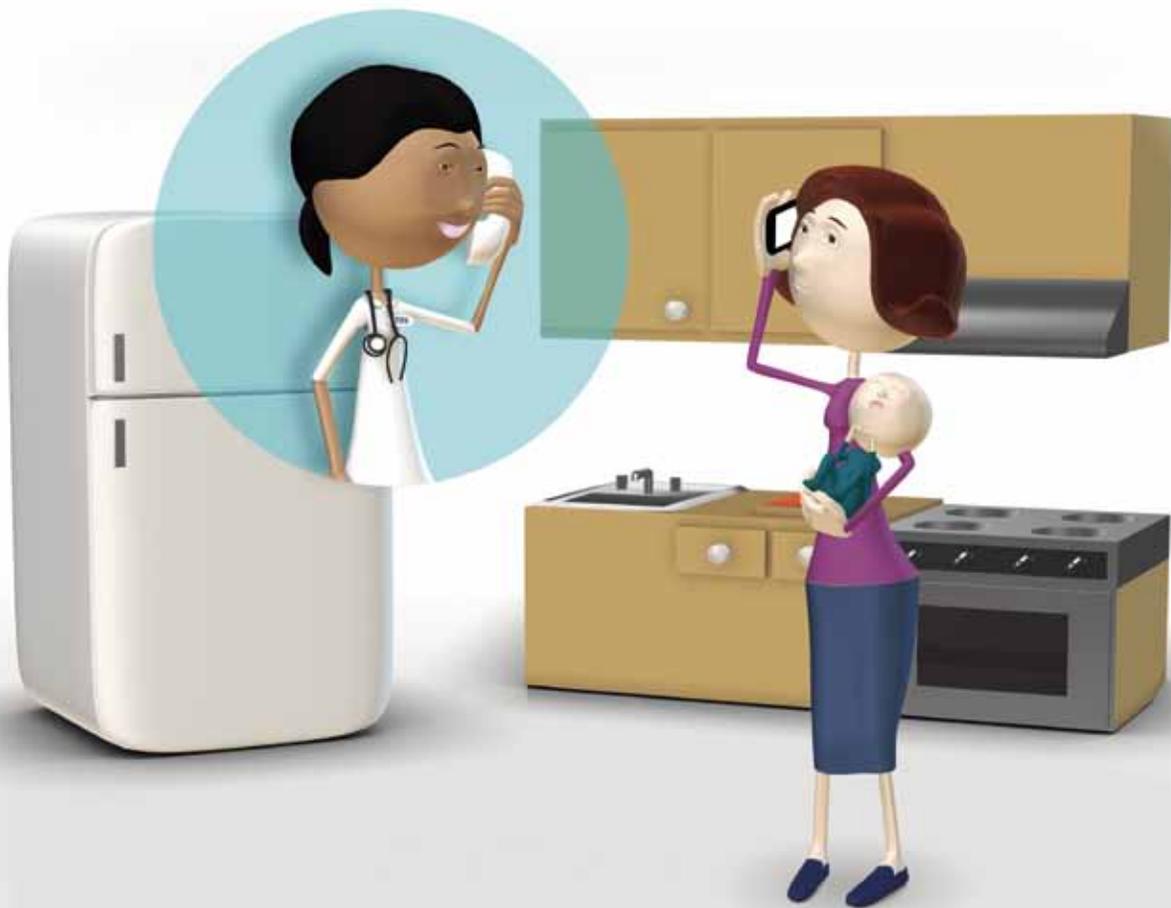


Department of Health and Wellness

HealthLink 811

Report 2009–2010



Peace of mind!

811   

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Message from the Executive Director

Dear Minister MacDonald,

It is with great pleasure that Primary Health Care presents our inaugural report for the period of July 2009 to July 2010 on the HealthLink 811 service. This report provides an overview of the HealthLink 811 program and the successes and challenges that continue to inform the delivery of safe, quality healthcare services to Nova Scotians. Future health-system reports on HealthLink 811 will be published based on the fiscal year beginning at the end of 2011–12.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped make this program a success and to acknowledge and thank the registered nurses who have provided Nova Scotians peace of mind surrounding their healthcare issues every day. This service is made possible only through their expertise, competence, and commitment to quality healthcare delivery. Their efforts greatly contribute to the health and wellness of Nova Scotians.

In July 2009, we implemented Nova Scotia's first Telecare service, faced challenges of an H1N1 outbreak, and established key relationships with our health-system stakeholders. 811 has quickly become a trusted, valuable resource for Nova Scotians, receiving over 100,000 calls during its first year of service.

We look forward to working in collaboration with our health-system partners on quality-improvement initiatives and the evolution of the HealthLink 811 program.

Sincerely,



Ian Bower
Executive Director
Primary Health Care & EHS



HealthLink 811 Objectives

HealthLink 811 is a program of the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness. HealthLink 811 provides Nova Scotians with trusted health information and advice by experienced registered nurses.

The objectives of the program are:

- to promote self-care
- to provide a reliable source of health-related information
- to reduce the need for travel for basic primary healthcare advice
- to increase capacity to respond to critical health-related events across the province (such as H1N1 and fires)
- to improve access to primary healthcare services

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Overview

Nova Scotia launched its Telecare service on July 29, 2009. Nova Scotians can dial 811 and receive reliable health information and advice from a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

More than 100,000 Nova Scotians received health information and advice over the phone from registered nurses during the first year of operations. In addition, online health information on a broad range of topics was accessed more than 30,000 times.

Nova Scotians calling 811 in the first year of operation (July 29, 2009, to July 31, 2010) most frequently sought advice on:

- fever in children older than 3 months
- abdominal pain
- pediatric vomiting
- pediatric cough
- nausea and vomiting

Part of ensuring a sustainable health system includes the use of information and communications technology to make healthcare services more accessible for each and every Nova Scotian. HealthLink 811 provides Nova Scotians with health advice that supports improved access to healthcare services by the right provider at the right time.

When a Nova Scotian calls 811, registered nurses will give the advice and information needed and provide reassurance concerning all kinds of general health issues and questions. Nova Scotians can also obtain information about health services available in their communities.

Bilingual registered nurses can provide service in French. The HealthLink 811 service is also available in multiple languages through a third-party language-interpretation service. This allows 811 to provide health information and advice in over 100 different languages.

A major success of the HealthLink 811 program during the inaugural period included its response to the H1N1 pandemic, increasing capacity to better serve Nova Scotians during a very difficult time.

Services

Growing demands on the health system require that we serve the health needs of individuals in more innovative and effective ways. HealthLink 811 (Telecare) is another way for innovation to play a role in improving access to healthcare services for rural and urban populations across the province. Telecare is a broad concept reflecting the use of electronic media in the provision of health care. The experience of other jurisdictions across Canada was invaluable in informing the design and implementation of our Nova Scotia service. Nova Scotia has implemented a Telecare service that:

- improves access to care advice by reducing or eliminating barriers of geography, mobility, culture, language, and cost
- provides recommendations and knowledge to patients so they will seek services that meet their healthcare needs
- delivers healthcare advice to the population so that individuals and families have the tools and knowledge for effective self-care

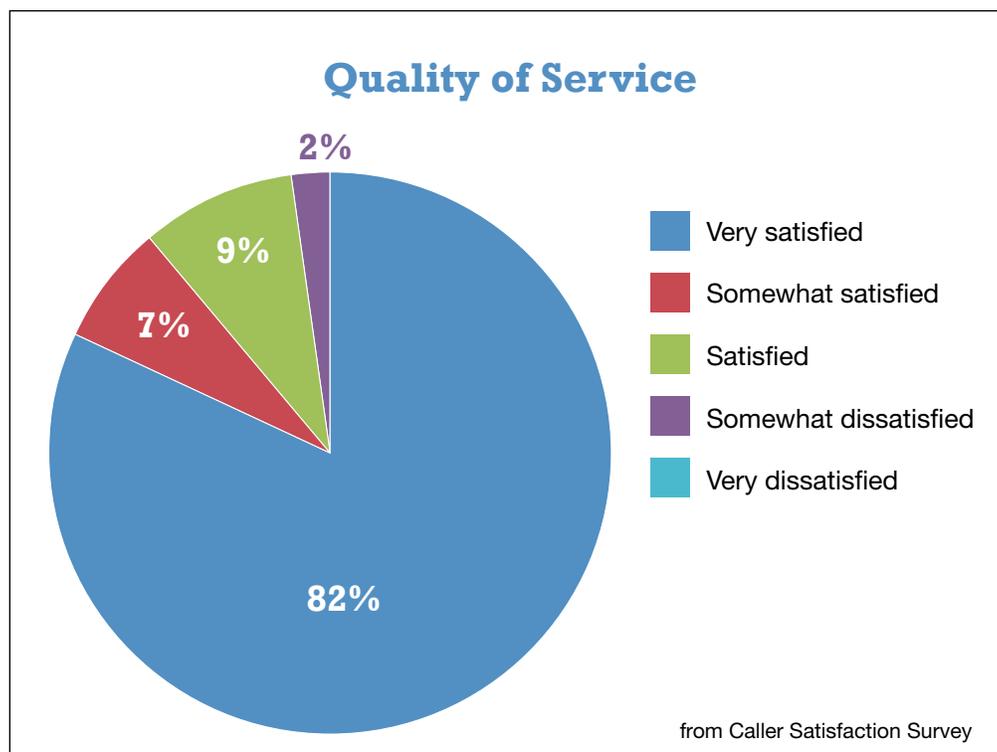
Key attributes of the HealthLink 811 service are:

- assessment of the urgency of a caller's symptom(s)
- provision of health advice and information by experienced registered nurses
- 24-hour per day, 7-day per week operation
- TTY service for the hard of hearing
- service in over 100 different languages (third-party language-interpretation service)
- an audio health library
- the website—trusted health information in both English and French
- emphasis on the delivery of culturally competent care
- an ability to increase capacity to respond to significant events affecting the health of communities (e.g., H1N1)

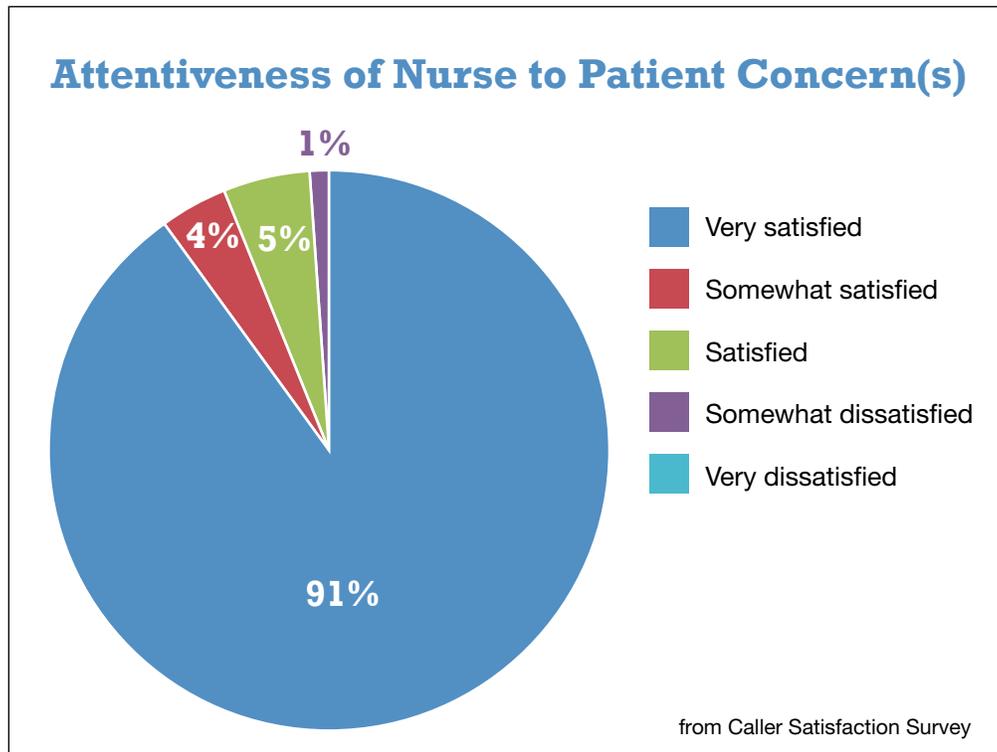
Caller Satisfaction and Quality Assurance

The delivery of safe and effective healthcare services provided by HealthLink 811 is a key priority, and our quality assurance framework is part of ensuring that we meet this objective. As part of this framework, callers and health-system stakeholders are encouraged to provide feedback on the service. This is done through both solicited and unsolicited feedback.

Feedback is encouraged from anyone with a question or concern about the service, and caller-satisfaction surveys are conducted routinely. These surveys are integral to the operation and evolution of HealthLink 811 services and to ensure caller confidence in 811 as a trusted source of health advice and information. Quality improvement opportunities are identified and implemented wherever possible.



More than 100 people who used the HealthLink 811 service soon after launching the program were surveyed in early September 2009. Over 97 per cent of those surveyed indicated they were satisfied with the service; over 85 percent were highly satisfied. There was a broad range of support for the service, including callers who were impressed with the convenience and ease of accessibility, the availability of information from a health professional, the reassurance provided by the service, and the ability to get help from a health professional without having to leave home and wait in the Emergency Department. Key data collected through patient satisfaction surveys included whether the nurse paid attention to the caller’s concerns and overall satisfaction with the quality of the service. Based on industry experience in Canada, expectations are that patient satisfaction rates are maintained at 92 per cent or better for overall patient satisfaction.



System Stakeholder Satisfaction

Healthcare providers and other health-system stakeholders are invited to share their experience with the program, including any feedback received from their patients and colleagues. Feedback from the health system is integral to the quality of the 811 service. In addition, feedback and collaboration on the program promote opportunities for integration with other areas of the health system. This feedback is collected and analyzed to identify trends, program effectiveness, and quality improvement opportunities. Examples of stakeholder feedback received since the launch of the program include the following:

- 811 is one of the best healthcare innovations introduced in Nova Scotia in a long time.
- The role the 811 service plays is appreciated by health-system providers.
- System partners acknowledge appropriateness of referrals to their service (e.g., 911 and Poison Control).
- 811 fever protocols required further review to ensure consistency with Nova Scotia guidelines.
- Consistency is required between the messages delivered by 811 nurses and other healthcare providers.

Any concerns received about 811 services result in a comprehensive quality review. This ensures that the call-handling process and clinical guidelines are applied appropriately. Quality-improvement opportunities are identified and implemented wherever identified to improve the service for Nova Scotians.



Community Responsiveness

Two important aspects of HealthLink 811 are its service inquiry process and community outreach activities. They help ensure that the 811 service is responsive to the needs of the public.

Service Inquiry Process—The 811 service relies on caller and stakeholder feedback to inform and improve the quality of patient care and service delivery. Through the service inquiry process, the public and providers are able to address concerns about an 811 call-handling process, guideline, response time, nursing interaction, or any other issue that, for the caller or stakeholder, is unclear or is considered unsatisfactory. The service inquiry process is open to all residents of Nova Scotia.

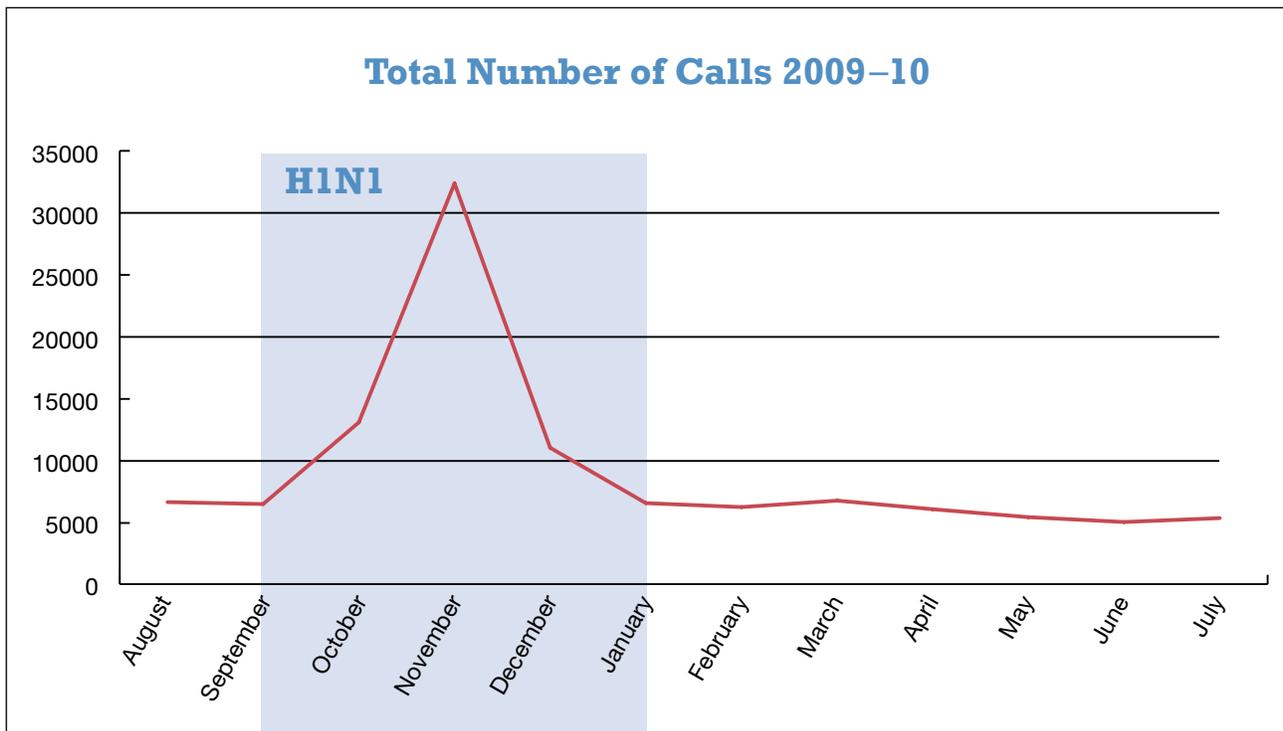
For more information, you may visit the 811 website: 811.novascotia.ca.

Outreach—Outreach activities are undertaken to promote the service to system stakeholders such as District Health Authorities and healthcare providers. Other related opportunities include participation in the 50+ and Family Expos. A major focus of these outreach activities is to address integration opportunities wherever possible with other services and organizations. In addition, the Telecare operator engages system stakeholders and interested parties on a number of key aspects of the program. Active health-system engagement supports local adaptation and acceptance of Teletriage guidelines and the development of health information topics that are consistent with provincial standards and approaches to health care in Nova Scotia.

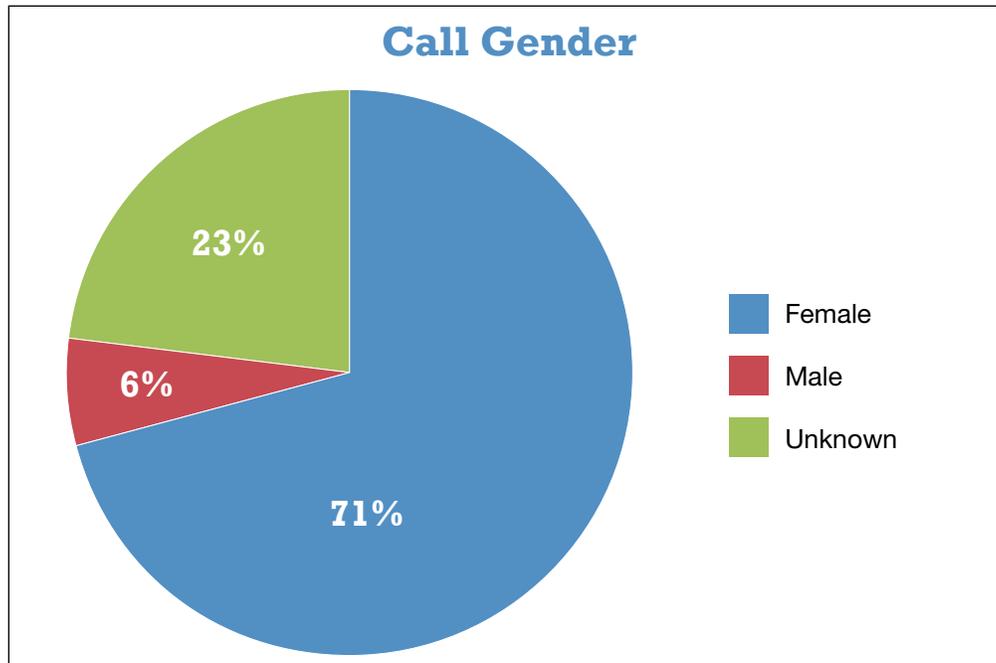
Teletriage Phone Service

A person who dials 811 from any phone registered in Nova Scotia is directed to an experienced registered nurse who will ask the caller to share their health-related question or describe the symptom(s) they or a family member are experiencing. The nurse will then assess the urgency of the symptom(s) described and provide advice and education about what the caller should do next. Advice ranges from self-care to “see your healthcare provider” to “visit the local Emergency Department;” or 811 may transfer the caller directly to Poison Control or 911.

From August 2009 to July 2010, there were 111,485 calls to the service. Call volumes remained constant, except for a significant increase in calls during the H1N1 outbreak. On average, Nova Scotians made approximately 225 calls to HealthLink 811 per day, excluding the spike in call volumes experienced during the H1N1 outbreak.



Nearly 75 per cent of calls received were from female callers and less than 25 per cent were from male callers.



More than 61,000 callers presented with symptoms requiring immediate assessment and follow-up care instructions. About 40 per cent of callers, or 28,000 people, did not need to see their healthcare provider or visit their local Emergency Department because they were provided self-care advice and information by 811.

The following are brief descriptions of each respective disposition:

Self-care Health information and advice that support an individual in the management of their symptoms at home, without further clinical intervention.

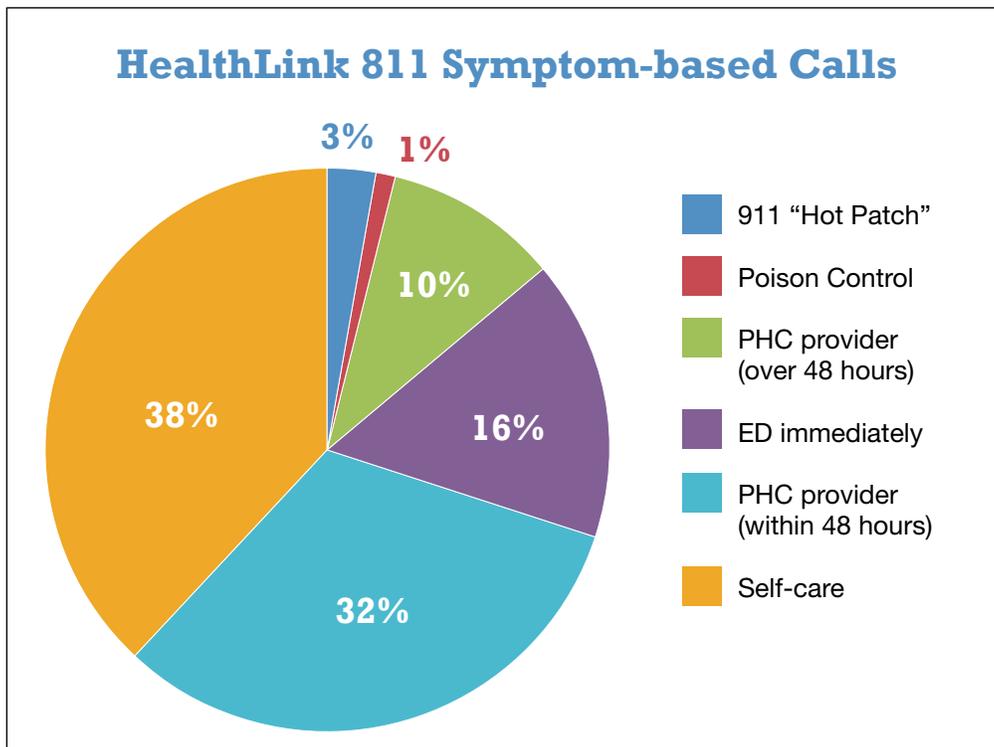
PHC (Primary Health Care) provider (over 48 hours) See your family doctor or nurse practitioner after 48 hours; represents multiple dispositions, such as “within 72 hours” or “within 7 days.”

PHC (Primary Health Care) provider (within 48 hours) See your family doctor or nurse practitioner within 48 hours; represents multiple dispositions, such as “as soon as possible” or “within 24 hours.”

Poison Control Direct transfer to the Regional Poison Centre if a potential or actual exposure to poison is suspected.

ED (Emergency Department) immediately Go to your Emergency Department immediately.

911 “Hot Patch” Direct transfer to 911 due to an emergency situation; the 811 nurse will remain on the line until the caller is safely transferred to 911 services.



HealthLink Nurses

When Nova Scotians dial 811, they can speak to an experienced registered nurse with access to a number of tools to support the safe and competent delivery of Telecare services, including

- Clinical Guidelines
- decision-support software
- a health information database for healthcare providers
- a database of community-based health services

The response and information provided by the nurses is supported by Clinical Guidelines, which

- guide the assessment of the urgency of a caller's symptom(s)
- support the nurse in recommendations surrounding what the caller should do next, including identification of the most appropriate source and time of care (not a medical diagnostic tool)
- guide the nurse in documenting a detailed record of the call

Medical Oversight and Clinical Advisory Committee

Clinical advice and support is provided to 811 through a Medical Director and Clinical Advisory Committee.

The 811 Medical Director provides clinical leadership and medical advice regarding Telecare service delivery and program development. Some of the duties of the Medical Director include

- chairing the Clinical Advisory Committee
- oversight to the Clinical Guidelines in collaboration with designated clinical staff and health system experts
- networking and outreach with the healthcare community throughout Nova Scotia to increase awareness, understanding, collaboration, and co-operation with the program
- participation in the quality assurance program

The Clinical Advisory Committee serves as an advisory group to 811 regarding clinical content and other issues related to the Telecare service. It contributes to and evaluates the program's quality-improvement initiatives, and it networks with health-system stakeholders to promote a better understanding of the scope and outcomes of the service. The committee membership is inter-disciplinary and comprises clinical expertise from across Nova Scotia.

Language Services

If the individual or a family member does not speak English, HealthLink 811 can provide services in more than 100 languages. Bilingual nurses are available to provide services in French. Services in other languages, including French if a bilingual nurse is unavailable, are offered through a third-party language-interpretation service. Callers to 811 have received services in French, Cantonese, Farsi, Spanish, Arabic, and Turkish.

Online Health Resources

HealthLink 811 provides reliable health information in both French and English on the 811 website (www.nshealthlink811.ca). This information can help Nova Scotians understand health issues that matter to them, their families, and their community. The website also highlights and provides information on current health issues affecting Nova Scotians, including seasonal health issues such as allergies and sun protection, or information surrounding an outbreak affecting communities across the province. During the first year of operations, the website was accessed 31,736 times.

Successes

Together with the Department of Health and Wellness and other system stakeholders, HealthLink 811 was critical to our provincial response to H1N1. The role that 811 played demonstrated the benefits and capacity of the service to truly support the health of Nova Scotians. Through the provision of relevant health information and advice, 811 provided peace of mind for our population during a very difficult time.

Related activities included increased staffing levels, deployment of additional technology, and working closely with partners across the health system to ensure that information available to the public was accurate and timely. During the H1N1 period from October 26 to the end of December, 2009, the average number of calls increased from approximately 200 per day to 2,000 per day.

Other activities critical to the H1N1 response included

- modification of the call-handling process to handle a significant spike in calls
- utilization of the Audio Health Library and the HealthLink 811 website to promote and support self-care

Dr. Robert Strang, Nova Scotia's Chief Medical Officer of Health, stated that the service was invaluable during the H1N1 pandemic:

"The 811 system was an effective way to ensure Nova Scotians had access to reliable and timely information about the pandemic and how to manage their symptoms. It is a vital part of the health system that can expand to meet significant events like a pandemic or other community health challenges."

Future Opportunities

The HealthLink 811 service has been identified as an important aspect of the health system.

This service presents a broad range of opportunities for future growth. Examples of opportunities for the further development of Telecare include

- integration with electronic health records to improve communication between care providers and to support continuity of care
- the addition of other providers to the service
- faxing caller health information to family physicians and other healthcare providers following an encounter with the 811 service

Public promotion is important and efforts are ongoing to increase the appropriate use and profile of the HealthLink 811 service. While use of 811 peaked during H1N1, more can be done to increase Nova Scotians' knowledge and understanding of this service and the fact that it is accessible 24/7.

Promotion of 811 to the public has been integral to helping Nova Scotians understand how 811 can support improved access to health care and to call 911 in the event of an emergency. How the public uses the services available to them has a significant impact on the health system and related services when they need them most.



Financing

The Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness has invested in the HealthLink 811 program to support improved access to primary healthcare services for all Nova Scotians. In year one of this service, government invested a total of \$5.6 million to provide HealthLink 811 services, the majority of which covered costs associated with human resources and related infrastructure. The return on investment will be measured through ongoing evaluation of benefits and outcomes.

Future Reports

We are very pleased to provide the inaugural report on the HealthLink 811 program for the first calendar year of operation, July 29, 2009, to July 31, 2010, inclusive. Future health-system reports on HealthLink 811 will include data analysis and trends, new components of the program, and future evolution opportunities. In addition, a technical report with extensive and detailed data on 811 utilization will also be released, to support health-system planning and program design.

Contacts at HealthLink 811

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