



## A Review of the Introduction of Mental Health Nurses to the Emergency Operations Centre at the London Ambulance Service

Kudakwashe Dimbi—Mental Health Clinical Advisor to the London Ambulance Service NHS Trust  
Briony Sloper—Deputy Director of Nursing and Quality, London Ambulance Service NHS Trust



### Introduction

This review describes an initiative by the London Ambulance Service to improve the specialist response we are able to provide for mental health patients calling into the service and supplement the knowledge, skills of our clinical staff.

The Trust had noted that demand from mental health callers was increasing in line with overall activity. Specific drivers for patients with mental health needs include the limited availability of crisis mental health service provision out of hours and the increased focus on community care. This led the service to examine other ways of supporting the specific needs of mental health patients to ensure the delivery of high quality patient care. There was also the desire to increase the knowledge and skills of our existing staff.

### Aims and Objectives

The aims of the service are to:

- Screen mental health calls using a risk assessment tool
- Refer mental health patients to the most appropriate mental health teams enabling direct patient referral.
- Provide expert mental health advice from the clinical hub improving access to assessment and advice for mental health callers.
- Support call handlers with challenging calls from people with mental health problems.
- Improve call handlers' ability to manage these calls through mental health awareness and skills training, supervision etc.
- Direct call handling of complex phone calls and/or situations where continued support over the phone is required.
- Support frontline ambulance crews from the clinical hub with mental health related issues at the scene of an emergency or incident.
- Provide expert advice around complex mental health issues such as those relating to clinical risk, Mental Health Act or Mental Capacity Act
- Provide informal and formal training for other LAS staff

### The Role

The work of the mental health nurses is broad and varied. They are expected to have an understanding of the mental health referral pathways and services available to patients pan London. They also provide an advisory role for frontline crews, fellow clinical hub staff and have the ability to take on challenging calls from call takers.

A summary of their main functions is divided into:-

- 1/ **Hear and treat service –providing a full mental health assessment and signposting appropriately, upgrading and deciding on the most appropriate course of action, advising patients over the phone. Depending on the outcome of the assessment, mental health nurses have numerous options available to them.**
  - Upgrade the call due to a clinical concern and request that a resource is dispatched.
  - Refer patients to be seen immediately. In some circumstances, the nurse could arrange for the patient to be further assessed at a mental health team base or hospital
  - Book a taxi to convey the patient to an appropriate destination
  - Advise the patient to make their own way to hospital/ mental health team
  - Signpost and refer for follow up by community mental health teams or their GP
  - Discharge the patient with appropriate advice or GP referral.
- 2/ **Warm transfers-assisting call handlers and fellow clinical advisors with the management of difficult calls**
- 3/ **Providing advice to frontline crews around mental health legislation and accessing mental health services**

### Impact

The initiative commenced in February 2015. A six month audit between April-September 2015 demonstrated that:

- 2.5 w.t.e Mental health nurses responded to 3,299 calls.
- 420 calls were closed with a hear and treat disposition (12.7%)
- They responded to all categories of calls and supported effective upgrading and downgrading of calls ensuring the patient received the right level of response to meet their urgent and emergency care needs
- On average they are responding to 19 calls per 12 hour shift

### Method

The service committed to :-

- Recruit 6 mental health nurses to join the clinical hub team
- Train the nurses to carry out telephone triage of patients including command point training, Manchester Triage System training, risk screening and generic clinical advisor training relevant to the London Ambulance Service.
- Communicate to patients that the service was available
- Engage with mental health trusts to support the effective use of appropriate care pathways
- Measure the impact of the service

### Summary of Learning

- There is a clear and valuable role for mental health nurses within the London Ambulance Service
- The decision to use mental health nurses to carry out a hear and treat function needs the support of local mental health trusts. The nurse needs to demonstrate awareness of the limits of their knowledge, skills and abilities.
- Close working between the mental health nurses and other staff within the service is essential in developing a shared understanding of the scope and nature of the service.