Pulse Checks in the NHS
Ideas Worth Spreading

About Atrial Fibrillation

- Atrial Fibrillation (AF) is the most common heart rhythm disorder with one million cases currently diagnosed in England.¹

- AF is associated with a multitude of symptoms including palpitations, breathlessness and fatigue. It causes serious discomfort to the patient and increases the risk of stroke by nearly 500%.²

- AF is estimated to cost the NHS £1.8 billion each year.³

- AF remains severely under-diagnosed. It is estimated that up to half of people with AF are still undetected.⁴

- A simple manual pulse check is one of the most effective ways of detecting suspected AF. Pulse checks can be delivered in a variety of settings, ranging from GP surgeries to flu clinics, pharmacies and libraries.

About This Report

This report was produced following a nationwide survey of Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and aims to showcase the most original ideas and best practice in delivering opportunistic pulse checks. We would encourage commissioners and healthcare professionals from across the country to take note of these examples and explore the feasibility of implementing some of these ideas in their localities. Through carrying out more opportunistic pulse checks and improving AF detection rates, we will not only help prevent much of the human suffering associated with AF but also assist the NHS in meeting its efficiency challenge as set out in the Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention (QIPP) programme.

Pulse Checks in NHS Health Checks

NHS Health Checks are aimed at adults in England aged between 40 and 74 to help lower their risk of developing four common diseases: heart disease, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease.

While a manual pulse check is not a compulsory part of the NHS Health Check, many PCTs encourage their local healthcare providers to include it as one of the tests carried out during the appointment.

Our research suggests that almost three quarters of PCTs currently provide pulse checks as part of their NHS Health Checks. We are greatly encouraged by this finding as it represents a significant increase on last year when our survey found that less than two thirds of PCTs included pulse checks in their NHS Health Checks.

We are delighted with the progress that has been made, however, there is still a lot to be done. We would encourage all remaining PCTs, as well as the incoming Clinical Commissioning Groups to consider the inclusion of pulse checks within their NHS Health Checks to improve AF detection and help prevent AF-related strokes.
Best Practice Examples

Through our survey of PCTs, we have learnt about some excellent innovative ideas across the NHS that can help increase AF detection rates. Here are some of the best examples of work being undertaken by the PCTs in promoting targeted pulse checks across the country.

**Targeted Pulse Checks**

**Long-term Conditions:** “Practitioners are expected to undertake a pulse check at every opportunity, for example during their consultations with their long term conditions patients, as this is likely to yield a higher return, as the prevalence is higher in people with existing medical conditions or older patients.” (NHS Wakefield District)

**Flu Clinics:** “We have asked practices to undertake a pulse check as part of the annual influenza immunisation programme in those aged 65 and over.” (NHS Sutton and Merton)

**The Elderly:** “We are in the process of considering the development of an IT alert, to flag up the need for a pulse check for all patients over 65 years, and/or those with risk factors for AF.” (NHS Hammersmith and Fulham)

**Emergency Care:** “Surrey Heart and Stroke Network are in discussion with the ambulance provider to pilot a pathway whereby their crews might identify a cardiac arrhythmia and be able to refer that patient to their GP.” (NHS Surrey)

**Opportunistic Checks:** “In the shopping centre, at a faith venue, during influenza vaccination.” (Barking and Dagenham PCT)

**Educating Professionals and Patients**

**Education Events in Partnership with Local Heart and Stoke Networks:** “The North West London CardioVascular and Stroke Network are holding an ‘Atrial Fibrillation Learning Event’. This event has been developed to raise awareness of the identification, risk stratification and risk management of AF patients... The event is primarily aimed at General Practitioners but General Cardiologists, Geriatricians, Cardiac Physiologists, Pharmacists, Specialist Nurses and others involved in or with an interest in AF are invited to attend.” (NHS Hammersmith and Fulham)

“Surrey Heart and Stroke Network are running a number of training events for primary care staff that run INR clinics and are taking the opportunity to raise the awareness of opportunistic pulse checks to staff who attend these events. Surrey Heart and Stroke Network presented at a recent educational event for private hospital providers in Surrey, and encouraged the use of manual pulse checks to identify AF.” (NHS Surrey)

**Local AF Advisors:** “We are aiming to recruit an AF advisor... part of the role will be to co-ordinate opportunistic screening of pulses e.g. during flu vaccinations” (NHS Haringey)

**AF Diploma Courses:** “We have over 18 practitioners currently undertaking an Atrial Fibrillation diploma course.” (NHS North East Lincolnshire Care Trust)

**Promoting Best Practice**

**Local Enhanced Services (LES):** “We have added ‘taking of the pulse’ to the Local Enhanced Services which 92% of GPs in Lincolnshire are now signed up to.” (NHS Lincolnshire)

**Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF):** “We also have a local QOF which further incentivises GP practices to find patients with AF who are not currently on the QOF register.” (NHS Bury)

References:

1) NHS Improvement
2-4) Atrial Fibrillation Association and Anticoagulation Europe (UK), The AF Report, 2011