
Access to Health Information and Care Expanded by Portuguese Health Helpline



Saúde 24 (S24), a telephone based service offering clinical assessment, health advice and health information in Portugal, has gained the trust of the Portuguese people by significantly improving direct access to healthcare advice, and is planning further expansion.

The national helpline directs callers to the most appropriate level of care and aims to ease pressure on more traditional branches of the healthcare service. It also enables the Portuguese Public Health System to allocate its resources more efficiently, ensuring the right level of care meets the right people, whilst the patients benefit from quick reassurance of their condition and advice on the best course of action to take. The top five most common ailments or symptoms registered by S24 are abdominal pain, nausea, coughing, a headache or a sore throat, with self care being the most frequent outcomes for a patient caller.

Launched in April 2007, the service has progressively gained widespread awareness and recognition (independent research reported 94 per cent of awareness in June 2010) and now handles an average of almost 1,800 calls per day, with a reported 100 per cent user satisfaction in August 2010.

The service is maintained by Linha de Cuidados de Saúde (LCS), a private company, formed to implement the S24 programme, and Clinical Solutions, which was chosen to provide S24 with the required software for call centre management and clinical decision support applications. LCS and Clinical Solutions are now working together to support the expansion and development of the service. The senior medical teams are equally collaborating on an ongoing basis in order to increase clinical content and help better manage the service and patient expectations.

During the influenza pandemic of 2009 the service was put to the test, answering more than 1,600,000 calls during that year, which were handled by a 1,000 health professionals at call centres in Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra, which was exclusively dedicated to flu triage and referral.

The current S24 service is viewed as a baseline for future growth in order to develop further ways to support the population of Portugal. Clinical Solutions already demonstrated its expertise through their success with NHS Direct in England and NHT24 (NorskeHelseTelefonen24) in Norway. S24 is set to continue expanding and aims to target patients with the most limited access to healthcare.

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