From the Chief Medical Officer
Professor Sir Michael McBride

HSS(MD) 14/2026

FOR ACTION
Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/HSC Trusts/NIAS
Chief Operating Officer, SPPG
Director, DHCNI
GP Medical Advisers, SPPG
All General Practitioners and GP Locums *(for onward distribution to practice staff and Community pharmacies)*
OOH Medical Managers *(for onward distribution to staff)*

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 90 520653
Email: cmooffice@health-ni.gov.uk

Your Ref:
Our Ref: HSS(MD) 14/2026
Date: 9 March 2026

Dear Colleagues

ADOPTION OF AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO MEDICATION REVIEW

We are writing to advise of the Department's recent policy decision to adopt a single approach to polypharmacy management in Northern Ireland (NI) by embedding a standard evidence-based process to all medication review across HSC settings informed by best-practice clinical guidance.

Informed by the findings of the iSIMPATHY study, the 7-Steps medication review process being adopted provides a clear structure for both the initiation of new and the review of existing treatments, and places an emphasis on 'what matters to the individual'?

The following 7-Steps (**Annex A**) are intended to structure the medication review process:
Step 1: Aim: What matters to the patient?
Step 2: Need: Identify essential drug therapy.
Step 3: Need: Does the patient take unnecessary drug therapy
Step 4: Effectiveness: Are therapeutic objectives being achieved?
Step 5: Safety: Is the patient at risk of Adverse Drug Reactions (ADRs) or suffers actual ADRs?
Step 6: Sustainability: Is therapy cost-effective and environmentally sustainable?
Step 7: Patient-centred: Is the patient willing and able to take therapy as intended?

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ACTIONS

Healthcare professionals across primary and secondary care completing medication reviews with patients should:

1. Adopt the evidence based 7 step methodology consistently to standardise the approach to medication review across HSCNI.

2. Avail of training opportunities on the use of the 7-step methodology. Please see details of initial training availability below.

The Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) and Digital Health and Care NI (DHCNI) should work collaboratively to take forward the following actions to facilitate implementation of the 7-step methodology, and develop an action plan with timeline for this work:

    a. Establishment of a multi-disciplinary oversight group comprising of all stakeholders to agree the therapeutic indicators and rationale for prioritisation

    b. Engagement with UK colleagues, including Scottish government colleagues involved in the recent publication of the [Polypharmacy Guidance: appropriate prescribing, making medicines safe, effective and sustainable 2026 – 2029](#) to share learning. Department colleagues will facilitate this engagement.

    c. Development of metrics to identify patients eligible for an annual medication review and risk stratification to allow prioritisation

    d. Development of an IT solution including the ability to add monitoring on the effect of polypharmacy medication reviews in due course.

The Pharmacy Forum NI (PFNI) will be considering endorsement of the revised Scottish Polypharmacy Guidance: appropriate prescribing, making medicines safe, effective and sustainable 2026 – 2029, for applicability in Northern Ireland.

3. Informed by the multi-disciplinary working group, the Transforming Medication Safety in Northern Ireland (TMSNI) team should support implementation of the 7-step methodology, including dissemination of materials and information to help ensure the right patient receives a structured medication review at the right time by the right healthcare professional, using resources and skills effectively and reducing duplication. Aligning this approach to medication review with current initiatives including 'Know Check Ask' and '5 Moments for Medication Safety'.

Background

In 2015, the Department formally endorsed [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guideline NG5 – "Medicines optimisation: the safe and effective use of medicines to enable the best possible outcomes](#)" as applicable in Northern Ireland.

The World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Patient Safety Challenge 'Medication Without Harm' published in 2017 includes polypharmacy as an area for prioritised improvement. In 2020, Departments' Transforming Medication Safety in Northern Ireland (TMSNI) strategy, which aims to improve safe practices with medicines and support a medication safety culture within our population, recognises this and includes an aim to take action to ensure that patients are taking the right medication for optimal benefit.

The TMSNI strategy details that prevalence of polypharmacy in Northern Ireland continues to increase, with our ageing population suffering from increasing frailty and multiple long-term conditions. Polypharmacy can be appropriate, based on clinical evidence and patient characteristics, or inappropriate, due to the irrational prescribing of too many medicines. Inappropriate polypharmacy can cause significant harm to patients from increased adverse effects, interactions between medicines, and medication errors, particularly at transitions of care. The strategy aims to build on our existing examples of best practice and reduce harm from inappropriate polypharmacy by adopting a robust and consistent approach to medication review across care settings.

The iSIMPATHY (implementing Stimulating Innovation in the Management of Polypharmacy and Adherence Through the Years) project was a €3.5m project, funded by the European Union's INTERREG VA Programme (2014-23). The project aims were to ensure the most sustainable use of medicines for patients by training pharmacists and other healthcare professionals to deliver person-centred medicines reviews and embedding a shared decision-making approach to managing polypharmacy.

The [iSIMPATHY evaluation report](#) was published in 2024 and contained the following recommendation:
'*Ensure the 7-Steps methodology is adopted when reviewing medicines with people with multimorbidity, improving understanding and facilitating shared decision making with empowered patients'*.

The project delivered on its key objectives by improving patient outcomes, safety and individual engagement with their medication regimens by fully adopting a person-centred 7-Steps approach. The key findings infographic is available within the [Executive Summary](#).

This process for medicine reviews, supported patients and clinicians to define and achieve realistic goals of drug treatment, and helped enable patients to lead healthy and active lives. It is a clear structure for both the initiation of new and the review of existing treatments, which places a greater emphasis on 'what matters to the

individual?'. The person-centred 7-Steps review process starts by matching therapeutic objectives to current life priorities with the individual. This is illustrated in **Annex A**. This initial discussion guides decision-making in subsequent steps that consider medication need, effectiveness, and safety before a therapeutic plan and follow-up strategy are agreed upon.

The iSIMPATHY project led to improvements in patient care through better medicines use. It demonstrated cost savings related to medicines changes and through reducing potential medication related harm.

The findings further inform implementation of the Departments' TMSNI strategy, with a specific commitment to reduce inappropriate polypharmacy by ensuring that all patients who are most at risk from harm receive at least an annual medication review.

Initial Education and Training opportunities in NI

The Northern Ireland Centre for Pharmacy Learning and Development (NICPLD) will be providing webinars that outline the 7-steps method as a structured approach to medication review applied to case study scenarios.

Initially webinars will be facilitated to provide healthcare professionals with the knowledge and skills to optimise medicines for older patients with multiple long-term conditions, using this structured approach to medication review. Webinars in March 2026 are available to enrol via https://www.nicpld.org/ (accessible by Pharmacists) and https://www.medicinesni.com/ (accessible by multidisciplinary healthcare professionals; doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists and allied health professionals).

From April 2026, a recording of the webinar will be available via the NICPLD and medicinesNI websites.

Thank you for your support in this important piece of work to reduce inappropriate polypharmacy by ensuring that all patients who are most at risk from harm receive evidence-based structured medication reviews to improve safe practices with medicines and support a medication safety culture within our population.

Yours sincerely

Professor Sir Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer
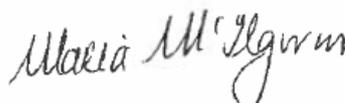
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Chief Nursing Officer
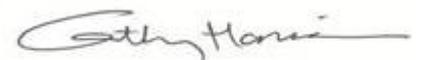
Professor Cathy Harrison
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

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This letter is available on the Department of Health website at
https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/professional-medical-and-environmental-health-advice/hssmd-letters-and-urgent-communications

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iSIMPATHY: Medication Reviews and the 7-step approach

The actions undertaken in each step begin with asking "what matters to the patient?"

- **Step 1**: sets the context within which all further decisions are made, namely establishing what matters to the patient
- **Step 2**: identify essential treatment
- **Step 3**: determine if the patient is taking unnecessary treatment
- **Step 4**: identify whether therapeutic objectives that matter to the patient are achieved and that there is evidence of the effectiveness of the medicines (NNT)
- **Step 5**: assess if any medicines are too risky or cause unacceptable adverse effects
- **Step 6**: consider which medicines are cost-effective and environmentally sustainable
- **Step 7**: determine whether the patient is willing and able to manage their medicines in a way that avoids harm and maximises benefit

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