

## **'Call Before, Save Lives': Reducing Emergency Department Visits through Effective Communication**

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**Abstract :** In 2021, Portugal has 63 emergency department (ED) visits per 100 people annually, the highest numbers in Europe. While EDs provide a critical service, high use is indicative of inappropriate and inefficient healthcare. In Portugal, all ED have the Manchester Triage System (MTS), a clinical risk management tool to enable that patients are seen in order of clinical priority. In 2023, more than 40% of the ED visits were of non-urgent conditions (blue and green), that could be better managed in primary health care (PHC), meaning wrong use of resources and lack of health literacy. From 2017, the country has a phone line, SNS24 (Contact Centre of the National Health Service), for triage, counseling, and referral service, 24 hours/7 days a week. The pilot project 'Call before, save lives' was implemented in the municipalities of Póvoa de Varzim and Vila do Conde (around 150.000 residents), in May 2023, by the executive board of the Portuguese Health Service, with the support of the Shared Services of the Ministry of Health, and local authorities. This geographical area has short travel times, 99% of the population a family doctor and the region is organized in a health local unit (HLU), integrating PHC and the local hospital. The purposes of this project included to increase awareness to contact SNS 24, before going to an ED, and non-urgent conditions oriented to a family doctor, reducing ED visits. The implementation of the project involved two phases, beginning with: i) development of campaigns using local influencers (fishmonger, model, fireman) through local institutions and media; ii) provision of telephone installed on site to contact SNS24; iii) establishment of open consultation in PHC; iv) promotion of the use of SNS24; v) creation of acute consultations at the hospital for complex chronic patients; and vi) direct referral for home hospitalization by PHC. The results of this project showed an excellent level of access to SNS24, an increase in the number of users referred to ED, with great satisfaction of users and professionals. The second phase, initiated in January 2024, for access to the ED, the need for prior referral was established as an admission rule, except for certain situations, as trauma patients. If the patient refuses, their registration in the ED and subsequent screening in accordance with the MTS must be ensured. When the patient is non-urgent, shall not be observed in the ED, provided that, according to his clinical condition, is guaranteed to be referred to PHC or to consultation/day hospital, through effective scheduling of an appointment for the same or the following day. In terms of results, 8 weeks after beginning of phase 2, we assist of a decrease in self-reported patients to ED from 59% to 15%, and a reduction of around 7% of ED visits. The key for this success was an effective public campaign that increases the knowledge of the right use of the health system, and capable of changing behaviors.

**Keywords :** contact centre of the national health service, emergency department visits, public campaign, health literacy, SNS24

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