## **Improving Detection and Treatment of Atrial Fibrillation Across England**

Atrial Fibrillation (AF) is the most common cause of irregular heart rhythm. It affects around 1.2 million people in the UK and is responsible for one in five strokes. Two thirds of these associated strokes can be prevented with the correct anti-coagulation therapy but with many people unaware that they have AF, it often goes undiagnosed and therefore untreated.

Data from NHS England’s ‘[Size of the Prize in Cardiovascular Disease Prevention](https://www.healthcheck.nhs.uk/seecmsfile/?id=983)’ indicated that if addressed properly, there was an opportunity to potentially avert over 4,500 strokes per year and save the NHS up to £241M in care costs by optimally treating high risk AF patients.

## What we did

To help, the Atrial Fibrillation (AF) programme was set up to be delivered nationally by all 15 [Academic Health Science Networks](https://www.ahsnnetwork.com/) (AHSNs). A whole systems approach was adopted, with each AHSN working with everyone along the patient pathway to support the sharing of learning and good practice across the country. AHSNs provided a suite of quality improvement tools and resources within GP practices to identify patients at risk of AF and to review existing AF patients to determine if their treatment could be optimized. With NHS England funding, AHSNs also distributed 6,000 mobile ECG devices to expand AF detection within domiciliary care, community-based clinics, community pharmacies and acute hospitals.

Dr Mohamed Mansoor, GP, The Ridings Medical Group said: *“… it’s an easy device to carry around, it’s small, it’s portable, it saves a lot of time by not having to have a full formal ECG when you think it is possible atrial fibrillation. It’s reassuring to the patient as well to know what the diagnosis is.”*

## Impact and next steps

The aim of the programme was to increase detection of AF from 70% to 85% and to increase the proportion of people treated with anticoagulant therapy from 78% to 84%. Analysis of the Atrial Fibrillation Programme from 2015-16 to 2019-20 using the annual Quality Outcomes Framework (QOF) dataset has shown that the programme is on track to achieve significant nationwide impact.

So far, patient care has improved through greater detection, protection and perfection of treatment for AF patients. A total of 256,147 people have been detected and added to GP’s AF registers and 293,348 additional people are now receiving anticoagulation treatment. The changes implemented have helped to avoid 11,734 debilitating AF-related strokes and have saved 2,933 lives through stroke prevention. Value for money has been achieved by reducing the burden of AF-related strokes for the health and care system with £158 million savings in NHS costs and £105 million savings in social care costs.

*David Peak, patient: “My GP was able to diagnose that I had AF quickly and easily. I am now on medication, which means I can live my life without the serious risk of a stroke.”*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the AF work has been further accelerated. The AHSN Network has supported NHS organisations by identifying remote ECG devices which can be used to detect AF in patients at risk of stroke, without needing face to face contact with the patients.

A national [AF toolkit](https://aftoolkit.co.uk/) has been developed from this work, to provide ongoing resources that will continue to support commissioners and clinicians in continuing to make improvements to the diagnosis and treatment of AF patients and also the sharing of learning and good practice from across the country.

From Kate Hall

April 2021