

Putting nutrition at the heart of patient care



Supply of life-sustaining specialist nutrition products during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges the world over. The specialist nutrition industry has been working tirelessly over the past six months to ensure that the supply of life-sustaining specialist nutrition products is reliable during a time when uncertainty and sudden change has become the new normality.

Supply of enteral tube feeds during COVID-19

As the scale of medical intervention required for those worst affected by COVID-19 became apparent, the UK Government launched a national effort to source ventilators for a significant number of additional patients. These patients would be unable to take any food orally and would be entirely reliant on enteral tube feeds to meet their nutritional needs for an average of 13 to 14 days¹ – requiring a similar effort from the medical nutrition industry to meet this significantly increased demand. By 22 March, when the UK-wide lockdown came into effect, industry had sourced an additional 16,000 enteral pumps and giving sets,* with further plans to continue increasing the stockpile. The sourcing of adequate quantities of enteral pumps, giving sets, feeds, nasogastric tubes and associated peripherals required close and positive collaboration with both the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the NHS.

The number of patients requiring tube feeding peaked at around 10,500 by 5 April,** significantly lower than the initial estimate. However, due to the nutritional and medical requirements of acute COVID-19 patients (i.e. reduced fluid, increased protein and contribution of non-nutritional calories), specialist formulas were in high demand, and ensuring sufficient supply presented a challenge for industry. The British Dietetic Association (BDA) Clinical Guidance Group, comprised of representatives from the BDA specialist groups, were instrumental in producing clinical guidance to support dietitians in the nutritional care of COVID-19 patients and in communicating the changing clinical understanding to industry as it developed.

Looking forward, industry is working closely with the DHSC to prepare for any future challenges. Currently, the focus of this collaboration is on ensuring an adequate stockpile of appropriate feeds and agreeing a centralised mechanism to support efficient distribution in the event of a second wave.

Home enteral feed prescriptions

In the UK, 47,000 patients are currently reliant on home enteral nutrition (HEN) to meet part or all their nutritional needs.*** The feeds of established

HEN patients are prescribed through the patient's local GP surgery and are sent to the feed manufacturer for dispensing and delivery to the home. The change in the delivery of primary care services during the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges for HEN manufacturers; life-sustaining repeat HEN prescriptions are difficult to obtain. Industry is working closely with the DHSC and the NHS Business Services Authority (BSA) to ensure that these prescriptions are issued when required. In the future, BSNA hope to see a more sustainable system for the issuing of HEN prescriptions and reimbursement that reflects the wider use of electronic prescribing across the NHS and Social Care.

Supply of infant formula during stockpiling

The first weeks of March saw panic-induced stockpiling of essentials. While this meant that many were struggling to find toilet paper and basic grocery items, parents of formula-fed infants were faced with the uncertainty of whether they could obtain formula. Manufacturers of infant formula had sufficient stock to meet demand, but panic buying quickly created empty shelves, leaving retailers scrambling to get products from distribution centres to stores.

In an effort to reassure UK parents and correct misinformation, the BSNA released a statement, on behalf of members who manufacture infant formula, to confirm sufficient stocks of formula were available within the supply chain. BSNA also worked closely with the DHSC and retailers to ensure that any barriers to supply were addressed. Unfortunately, there was also an increase in third party selling of formula at levels significantly above recommended retail prices, as retailers struggled to restock products. BSNA member companies were diligent in identifying this illegal activity and reporting it to the platforms involved.

From 18 March, the UK's biggest supermarkets imposed limits on purchasing of essentials items to ensure products remained on shelves, and stockpiling for selling on was restricted. This was extended to include infant formula. At this point, supply stabilised and demand levelled, allowing the supply chain to return to a sustainable level.

References: 1. Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC). ICNARC report on COVID-19 in critical care 24 July 2020 [Internet]. London: ICNARC; 2020 Jul 24 [cited 2020 Aug 14]. 40 p. Available from: www.icnarc.org/DataServices/Attachments/Download/af7be2d4-bdcd-ea11-9127-00505601089b.

* Figures collated from commercial information provided by BSNA member companies, 2020. ** Information provided by a DHSC representative. *** Figures collated from commercial information provided by BSNA member companies, 2019.

About the British Specialist Nutrition Association

The British Specialist Nutrition Association (BSNA) is the trade association which represents high quality specialist nutritional and aseptically compounded products. Our members produce infant formula, follow-on formula, young child formula, complementary weaning foods, medical foods for diagnosed disorders and medical conditions, parenteral nutrition and provide aseptic compounding services for chemotherapy, antibiotics and Central Intravenous Additive Services (CIVAS).