

Analysis of GP Patient Survey 2017

The GP Patient Survey is an independent survey run by Ipsos MORI on behalf of NHS England. The survey is currently conducted annually, but has previously been conducted biannually and quarterly. The survey is sent to over a million people across England to gauge their feelings on general practice. The latest version saw just over 800,000 people respond. Data is published both weighted and unweighted (the data analysed in the briefing is weighted). **The percentage changes referred to below refer to increases or decreases in percentage points, not proportional changes. Unless clarified, the comparisons being made are between 2012 and 2017 iterations of the survey.**

Headlines:

- Patients are finding it much harder to get through to the surgery, and are less likely to see their preferred GP.
- When patients do make an appointment, an increasing percentage attempt to speak to a GP or nurse over the phone. Proportionally speaking, more people are now attempting to see or speak to someone further in advance or without a date in mind at all than five years ago.
- An increasing percentage of patients find themselves unable to make an appointment, while more find themselves speaking to someone over the phone rather than in person.
- The proportion of patients reporting a positive experience of making an appointment is falling.
- The proportion of patients giving their GP positive ratings for spending enough time with them, listening to them and involving them in decisions about their own care has shown a small decrease. Confidence and trust in GPs remains high, (albeit with a small decrease since 2017).
- The only long-term condition to show any substantial increase among patients is mental health conditions. The percentage of patients with some degree of depression or anxiety is also increasing.
- Patients are increasingly dissatisfied with out-of-hours services.
- The percentage of patients reporting an overall positive experience of their surgery is still high but steadily falling.

Though GPs and staff at surgeries continue to work hard to provide a high level of service, these figures are an indication of the growing impact of unsustainable pressures on general practice.

Through no fault of GPs, the needs and expectations of patients are increasingly being unmet, largely due to the failure to address increasing staff shortages insufficient funding.

It is reassuring that patients continue to have a high level of trust in doctors, and satisfaction with the care they receive, but with the NHS at breaking point, the government must implement a long term, sustainable plan to ensure there are enough GPs to see patients in need of care as promptly as possible.



Access

- Last seen or spoke to a GP
The number of patients who have seen or spoken to their GP in the three months prior to answering the survey has declined, from 54% to 50.3%. The proportion who last interacted with the GP over 6 months ago increased by 3%.
- Ease of getting through to someone at GP surgery on the phone
Patients have been finding it harder to get through to their surgery. 22.5% said they found it very easy in the most recent survey, compared with 30.9% in 2012. 27.9% said they found it not very easy or not at all easy, up from 18.4%.
- Frequency of seeing preferred GP
The proportion of patients able to see their preferred GP on a regular basis also fell – 41.9% said they could see their preferred GP always or almost always in 2012. In 2017, that figure has fallen to 32.8%.

Making an appointment

- Last time you wanted to see or speak to a GP or nurse... What did you want to do?
Fewer patients currently attempt to see a doctor at the surgery – 74.1% said that the last time they wanted to see or speak to a GP, they wanted to do it in person, compared with 77.1% in 2012. **The proportion of people attempting to speak to their GP or nurse on the phone increased over the same period,** from 6% to 8%.
- When did you want to see or speak to them?
 The proportion of patients attempting to see a GP or nurse at the surgery on the same day fell very slightly (40% in 2017 compared with 41.4% in 2012) – **the proportion of patients attempting to see or speak to someone on the next working day fell by almost four per cent** however (from 12.6% to 8.9%); **patients wanting to speak to someone a week or more later increased from 5.5% to 7.8%,** and those who didn't have a specific day in mind increased from 13.5% to 17%.
- Able to get an appointment to see or speak to someone
Fewer patients said that were able to get an appointment or speak to someone at the surgery, falling from 75.3% to 72.1%.
- What type of appointment did you get?
Of the patients who did succeed in getting an appointment, 4.8% fewer saw their GP at the surgery, while 3.2% more spoke to their GP on the phone.
- How long until actually saw or spoke to GP/nurse
 The proportion of patients who spoke to their GP or nurse on the same day has shown a small increase (38.1% in 2017, 36.3% in 2012), but **the proportion of patients who saw a GP or nurse on the next working day fell by 4.3% (to 9.9%), and those answering a few days later fell by 5.4% (to 27.9%). The proportion who answered a week or more later increased by 7.2% to 20% of patients.**
- Overall experience of making an appointment
The percentage of patients reporting a positive experience of making an appointment fell by 6.5% from 2012.

Last GP appointment

- Rating of GP giving you enough time
The percentage of patients rating their GP as very good decreased by 3.1% (currently 46.3%), although proportionally more rated their GP as good (0.9% increase). There was a small increase (0.6%) in the proportion rating their GP as *poor* or *very poor* with regards to receiving enough time from them.
- Rating of GP listening to you
 There were similar changes in the responses to the question of GPs listening to their patients. There was a small decrease in the proportion of patients rating their GP *very good* (1.8%), and a small increase in GPs rated *good* (0.8%).
- Rating of GP involving you in decisions about your care
 The percentage of patients answering very good or good fell by 1.8% from 2012 (although this corresponded with an increase in patients answering that this question *doesn't apply*, as opposed to a commensurate increase in negative ratings).
- Confidence and trust in GP
The percentage of patients who answered that they had confidence and trust in their GP (yes, definitely or yes, to some extent) has remained fairly constant since 2012. 91.9% of patients still trust their GP, compared with 93% in 2012.

- Nurse appointments

The above trends were largely replicated across appointments with nurses. There were small decreases in the percentages of patients awarding ratings of *very good* with regard to receiving enough time in their appointment, being listened to and involved in decisions about their care. The highest rating of confidence and trust (*yes, definitely*) fell by 1.6%.

Personal health

- Long-standing health condition

The proportion of patients who said that they have a long-standing health condition has remained relatively unchanged (fluctuating within just a 1% range).

- Medical conditions

The only medical condition to show significant increase was long-term mental health problems – 5.7% of patients reported suffering mental health issues, compared with 4.2% in 2012.

- Anxiety/depression

There was an increase in the proportion of patients reporting some degree of anxiety or depression (2.3%).

- In last 6 months, had enough support from local services or organisations to help manage long-term health condition(s)

The percentage of patients who responded *no* to this question increased by 1.6% (12.7%, up from 11.1% in 2012). In terms of those who answered yes, there was a shift towards yes, to some extent (increased by 1.3%) and away from yes, *definitely* (decreased by 2.1%).

Overall experience

- Overall experience of GP surgery

The percentage of patients who answered either *very good* or *good* fell by 3.5%, from 88.3 to 84.8%.

Out of hours

- Know how to contact an out-of-hours GP service

The proportion of patients who said they knew how to contact out-of-hours GP services fell by 1.7% between 2012 and 2015 (question not included in recent surveys).

- Ease of contacting the out-of-hours GP service by telephone

The proportion of patients who felt it was *not very easy* or *not at all easy* increased by 2.5% between 2012 and 2015. Patients answering that it was very easy fell by 2.8% (question not included in recent surveys).

- Impression of how quickly care from out-of-hours GP service received

The percentage of those answering *it took too long* increased by 2.7%.

- Overall experience of out-of-hours GP services

The percentage of people answering *very good* or *good* fell by 4.6%.

Analysis:

On the surface, the findings from the survey would seem to suggest that the public perception of general practice in England has suffered in the past five years. Patients are now reporting a less positive experience at almost all points in their general practice care pathway.

They are now find it harder to get through to their surgery to seek advice or arrange an appointment; when they do get through, they have to wait longer to see a GP (and it is now less likely that it is their preferred GP who they will see when they get to the surgery). Most appointments do still take place at the surgery itself, but a greater percentage now take place over the phone (and the proportion of patients unable to make an appointment at all is increasing).

There has also been a small decline in how patients perceive their GPs – more now feel that their doctor did not give them enough time and confidence in GPs, while still high, is currently falling. Patients are also more dissatisfied with the availability/capacity of out-of-hours-services to meet their needs.

Many of the changes in patients' perceptions of general practice are proportionally fairly small – however, the trends are broadly consistent across most of the answers to the survey, and they point to increasing levels of dissatisfaction amongst patients about their access to GPs, and their experiences at GP surgeries. This is encapsulated in the answers to the question of patients' overall experiences of surgeries, which seen a fall of 3.5% in positive responses since 2012.

The survey should be viewed in context however – the BMA has already highlighted the pressures under which GPs currently find themselves, and there's strong evidence to suggest that demand is increasing in general practice:

- The number of patients registered at practices in April 2017 was 58.3m. This figure has increased by 2.3m since 2013, at an average rate of growth of 0.25% per quarter.
- The average rate of growth between 2013 and 2017 amongst age groups over 50 was 7.62%. Amongst age groups under 50 it was 2.4%.
- The Kings Fund have also produced research which indicates that in terms of GP interaction with different age groups, contacts with the patients aged 85 and over is increasing at a much faster rate (25%) than with any other age group.
- In 2015/16, 8.1% of the NHS budget in England was spent on general practice. The BMA has called for this figure to be increased to 11%.
- Between 2008/09 and 2016/17, referrals from GPs to secondary care increased by 32%, from 10.6m to 14m. On average, the number of referrals has increased by 3.6% per year, or by an average of 29k per quarter.
- A Commonwealth Fund international survey reported in 2015 that 73% of primary care doctors in the UK were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the amount of time they were able to spend with patients.

Faced with a heavier workload, it would seem that GPs are increasingly unable to deliver the quality of service to which they aspire; the government should heed the BMA's calls to increase funding for general practice and address problems with recruitment and retention, or risk damaging the relationship between GPs and their patients even further.