PRACTICE

NIHR SIGNALS

Online patient feedback is positive, but not used effectively

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Abstract

The study

Powell J, Atherton H, Williams V, et al. Using online patient feedback to improve NHS services: the INQUIRE multimethod study. *Health Serv Deliv Res* 2019;7:38.

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To read the full NIHR Signal, go to: https://discover.dc.nihr.ac.uk/content/signal-000861/online-patient-feedback-is-mostly-positive-but-is-not-being-used-effectively

Why was the study needed?

Online customer feedback is now routinely used by many industries, but the NHS has not yet effectively harnessed this feedback to help make improvements.

While there has been much work around patient centredness and patient experience, there is a lack of clear direction about how to deal with patient feedback. As patients increasingly go online to express views, care providers risk missing concerns if they are not prepared for listening. The lack of an effective response to patient feedback has been highlighted by recent high profile investigations into failures within the NHS, including in Mid-Staffordshire.

Doctors have expressed doubts about online patient feedback, questioning its validity and representativeness, as well as raising concerns around professional relationships with patients, confidentiality, and the difficulties they face responding to online feedback.

This NIHR-funded study (the INQUIRE study) aimed to take a broad look at the use of online patient feedback in the NHS, to provide evidence about how it might be improved.

What did the study do?

Researchers reviewed 78 studies (up to January 2018) from the US, UK, Germany, and elsewhere. They consulted 15 healthcare stakeholders from the UK with online feedback experience to identify the questions for their analysis.

A representative sample from the UK (2036 participants) was surveyed face-to-face with a public questionnaire survey.

An online questionnaire was also completed by 1001 registered doctors and 749 nurses and midwives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 people who had read others' healthcare service reviews or provided their own.

Organisational case studies were carried out at four NHS trust sites, including two mental health and community trusts, one large acute trust, and one specialist trust. A researcher spent six to 10 weeks within each trust.

What did it find?

● The survey of the general public found that 90% were internet users. In the past year, 42% of these had read online healthcare feedback and 8% had provided feedback. Those who read feedback were more likely to be younger, female, with a higher income, and more frequent internet users. More frequent internet users were also more likely to provide feedback.

● The most frequent reasons for reading feedback were: finding out about a drug, treatment, or test; and helping to choose a treatment or provider. Motivations for writing feedback were to inform other patients, praise a service or improve standards of services. Almost all respondents (94%) said they had never been asked to provide feedback by their healthcare provider.

● The survey of doctors and nurses found that 28% of doctors and 21% of nurses were aware that patients or carers had provided online feedback about an episode of care in which

they were involved, and 21% of doctors and 11% of nurses had experienced online feedback about them as an individual practitioner. Doctors were more likely than nurses to believe that online feedback is unrepresentative and mostly negative. Concerns were expressed about representativeness and a lack of guidance on how to use feedback.

● Most online feedback was positive. Individuals often had multiple motivations for giving online feedback, including the desire to engage in a "conversation" to improve healthcare services and support staff and other patients. The researchers suggested that it is appropriate and helpful to think of online feedback as a way to start a conversation and for patients to show their care for the NHS.

● For NHS trusts, online patient feedback was found to be gradually changing how trusts are held accountable and to whom. However, trusts may lack the infrastructure to address multiple channels and increasing amounts of online feedback, and to ensure responses are swift and publicly visible.

What does current guidance say on this issue?

A 2012 guideline from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence on patient experience states that patients should be encouraged to give feedback on the care that they receive and that clinicians should respond to any feedback given. The guideline does not outline specifically how online patient feedback should be addressed.

The government has outlined a vision for the future of digital healthcare in their policy paper '*The future of healthcare: our vision for digital, data, and technology in health and care*' (2018), which notes the need for improved online services and other technology infrastructure in the NHS and to build an open culture where feedback is welcomed.

What are the implications?

These results highlight a lack of organisational preparedness in dealing with online patient feedback.

The government has an ambitious digital health agenda with the idea of a patient as a digitally sophisticated health consumer at its core. Service providers will need to develop more robust infrastructure and processes for engaging with online patient feedback to make this a reality.

The Point of Care Foundation has developed a practical guide based on this study's findings, to help teams in the NHS to use online patient feedback to improve quality in healthcare.

1   Department of Health and Social Care. *The future of healthcare: our vision for digital, data and technology in health and care.* Department of Health and Social Care, 2018.
2   National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. *Patient experience in adult NHS services: improving the experience of care for people using adult NHS services. CG138.* National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2012.
3   The Point of Care Foundation. Using online patient feedback to improve care. London: The Point of Care Foundation; 2019.