

What are the attitudes and behaviours of frontline NHS staff to online feedback? Survey of health professionals to understand practice, attitudes and use of online feedback.

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Abstract

We conducted a survey of health professionals to understand practice, attitudes and use of online feedback. More nurses than doctors felt that online feedback was useful for improving services. A small proportion of both groups reported having had patients leave a comment about their care, and a small proportion encouraged patients to leave feedback. The findings have implications for the introduction and use of online feedback in the NHS.

Introduction

There has been a rise in the amount of commentary from patients and carers being received via the internet. (1, 2) This may be via structured forms, for example websites like NHS Choices, or via unstructured and unsolicited narratives such as blogs, fora or social media. Data in both the UK and US show that online feedback on healthcare is increasing and likely to grow fast in the coming years. (3, 4) NHS England has committed to using internet feedback as part of its vision for a digital NHS.(5) However at present there is no consensus or clear policy about how to use online feedback to deliver NHS and patient benefit, and there is a very limited evidence base to draw upon. We need to establish whether this is (or could be) credible and useful for NHS service improvement. The 'Improving NHS Quality Using Internet Ratings and Experiences' (INQUIRE) study aims to improve NHS capability to interpret online feedback from patients and the public, and to understand whether and how to act on this to improve services.

Issues of quality and patient experience are relevant to all NHS staff, and especially to frontline clinical staff. Health professionals will often be the subject of online comment which may or may not be moderated. Many clinicians appear cautious about the value of online content, but evidence on health professional attitudes and behaviours is lacking. The attitudes of healthcare professionals towards new technologies have a strong influence on the speed and success of their adoption by the health service.(6, 7) As part of the wider INQUIRE study we set out to obtain the first UK data on the characteristics, attitudes and self-reported behaviour of health professionals towards online feedback, identifying potential barriers and facilitators to the use of such content for health service improvement.

Methods

We conducted a questionnaire survey with two key groups of frontline clinical staff, namely doctors and nurses. The questionnaire focused on whether these staff had used online feedback (either specific to their own practice, or more generally) and their attitudes towards this type of commentary. For doctors, the questionnaire survey was administered to a quota-sampled representative group of 500 secondary care (across specialties) and 501 primary care doctors using Doctors.net.uk, the UK online portal and network for the medical profession. For nurses we administered an online survey via the Royal College of Nursing, via advertisement in the Nursing times, and via social media. Descriptive statistics were produced for variables related to use. We are currently using multivariate analysis to investigate doctors and nurses use/attitudes/self-reported behaviour regarding online health comments from patients. All analyses are conducted using the statistical software package SPSS version 23.

Results

A total of 1001 doctors completed the survey of which 501 (50%) were a general practitioner (GP) and 500 (50%) were hospital doctors. A total of 749 nurses completed the survey, of which half (50.1%) were nurses in a hospital setting and almost a third (30.0%) were nurses in a community setting. Demographic characteristics of the groups are similar to national profiles for doctors and nurses in the UK.

We observed differences in attitudes between doctors and nurses. The majority of nurses (74%) agreed that online patient feedback on experiences of NHS care captured on internet reviews and ratings sites is useful to help the NHS improve services, but only 39% (162/1001) of doctors agreed. Attitudes differed between hospital doctors and GPs. Hospital doctors (53.4%) were more likely than GPs (24.2%) to agree that online patient feedback on experiences of NHS care which is captured on internet reviews and ratings sites is useful to help the NHS improve services.

When asked about experiences, 21% of doctors reported that they had had patients/carers leave online feedback on an internet review or ratings site about an episode of care in which they were involved, with this being lower for nurses (11.1%). The majority of doctors (71.8%) and nurses (62.5%) never or rarely encourage their patients/carers to leave feedback on internet reviews and ratings sites.

The full results of the survey will be available by January and shared at the event.

Discussion

Doctors and nurses differ in their attitudes towards online feedback, with nurses more positive about the potential it has for service improvement. Within groups of doctors, general practitioners are more skeptical and this perhaps reflects the nature of the setting,

being accessible to all and comprising the majority of the contacts that people have with the health service.

There has been no previous data relating to proportions of practitioners who experienced having patients comment on their care. Our data indicates that this is happening, and more so for doctors than nurses. It highlights the need for healthcare professionals to understand how to react to and act upon such commentary, and these processes do not currently exist within the NHS. The low proportions of professionals that actively encourage patients to leave feedback may have implications for the introduction of feedback systems, especially if these come in at a policy level and rely on professionals to promote their use amongst patients.

Conclusion

The results of the survey are important for future research and the development of policy. The findings will be combined with the other elements of the INQUIRE study to develop a toolkit and training resources for NHS organisations (providers and commissioners) to encourage appropriate use of online feedback (social media and ratings sites) in combination with other patients' experience data.

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