

How do I have my say?

Finding information about making a complaint at Camden GP surgeries: A mystery shopping project



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Introduction

Most medical care and treatment goes well, but occasionally people are not happy with the care or treatment they have received. When this happens patients have the right to complain. However, through our discussions within the local community and Healthwatch network, we know that some people find the NHS complaints processes difficult to navigate and that this can deter them from making a complaint. In addition, some people are reluctant to complain because they are worried it may affect their care, or that it won't make any difference. Others may require additional support but not know where to find it.

More than half of us who want to complain do not. For people dealing with serious health issues the challenges can be so great they give up - particularly those with chronic medical issues.¹ It is important that barriers to complaining are removed so that everyone can access their right to complain, and where necessary, to redress.

Over the last year a number of reports have touched upon issues with the NHS complaints systems and culture, and the need for change is unequivocal.² Through their work handling complaints since April 2013, NHS England have identified scope for improvement in the ways that general practice invites and responds to complaints. They observed a high proportion of complaints related to clinical treatment (24 per cent) and communications/attitude (27 per cent).³ NHS England also identified that North West and North East London have a high rate of complaints compared with other regions.⁴

Based on our conversations with the local community, and the national focus on complaints more generally, we decided to explore how easy it is to make a complaint at GP practices in Camden. To do this, we sent a mystery shopper to all practices in the borough to ask about the complaints process. They also looked at the information available in reception and online.

What we did

Our mystery shopper visited all 39 GP surgeries in Camden to build a snap-shot picture of complaints processes across the borough. The visits were made during

¹ Healthwatch England (2013). *Improving the health and social care complaints systems. Background and position briefing*.

² See for example The Berwick review into patient safety (2013) *'A Promise to Learn a Commitment to Act'*, and *'A Review of the NHS Hospitals Complaints System: Putting Patients Back in the Picture'* (2013)

³ NHS England (November 2013) *'Transforming primary care in London: General Practice A call to action'* p31 <http://www.england.nhs.uk/london/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2013/11/Call-Action-ACCESSIBLE.pdf>

⁴ As above p32

November 2013, on different days and at different times. Each surgery was visited once.

The mystery shopper looked in the waiting room for information on the practice's complaints procedure and any other relevant information.

The NHS guidance on complaints sets out that the first step in making a complaint should be to request a copy of the practice's complaints procedure, which will provide guidance for the practice's in-house resolution protocol.⁵ Typically the next step in this process is to raise the matter in writing or by speaking with the practice.

Our mystery shopper spoke with reception staff - explaining that a family member wanted to make a complaint, and asking for a copy of the practice's complaints procedure and/or forms. Our mystery shopper also considered how the reception staff handled his request.

Where the reception was very busy our shopper did not wait, in order to avoid causing additional waiting for patients. Our mystery shopper also looked online for each practice's complaints procedure and/or form.

What we found

Our mystery shopping experience highlights the helpful and professional nature of the reception staff in Camden's GP practices Camden. The mystery shopper said that members of staff in some practices showed genuine concern for his relative. That some of the staff were keen to resolve complaints on the spot is very positive. Addressing misunderstandings, communication issues or minor complaints before they escalate to the formal complaints process can be beneficial for all involved.

Waiting times to speak to a receptionist were generally very short. The majority of staff (at 23 of 39 GP surgeries) knew how to handle our request for a complaints procedure, and when they did provide information, they did so quickly. It is also positive that more than half (10) of those that provided a form (18 surgeries) also took time to explain it. However, around a third of receptionists had to seek advice from a colleague before providing the information, so there may be a need for refresher training in some places.

NHS guidance advises people to request a copy of the practice's complaints procedure, but only 10 of the 39 practices provided our mystery shopper with one. 12 practices provided a complaints form for patients to use as a template for their

⁵ Patients can choose to bypass this step by going directly to NHS England or a local CCG in order to reach a local resolution. If patients are unable to reach a local resolution they may take their case to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman who may investigate the issue.

complaint.⁶ A few provided other information, such as details of Patient Advice and Liaison Services or NHS complaints advocacy. 20 practices provided no written information.

We recognise that some people may prefer to raise issues directly with reception staff rather than use a complaints form, and this is to be encouraged as a conversation can help resolve problems quickly and easily.

However, we also recognise that some people may find it difficult to complain face-to-face at the reception or on the phone. Writing a complaint down can give people time to think about what they want to say and to express it clearly. A complaints form provides an opportunity to ask useful prompts to help the complainant order their thoughts and provide all the information required to achieve resolution.

Very few practices provided information about the time scale of the complaints process and when the complainant would hear back.

Where no complaints procedure was provided, our mystery shopper was advised to contact the practice manager directly in most instances. At two practices our mystery shopper was advised to contact NHS England as a first port of call. He told us this made him feel worried that the complaint may get 'lost in the system', as NHS England seems like such a large organisation. Directing patients to NHS England as standard would leave these practices with little opportunity to resolve the issue locally and with the individual.

Around two thirds of the practices provide some information about complaints in their waiting rooms - for example information about the Care Quality Commission or about Patient Advice and Liaison services (although there is no longer a primary care PALS service, so this is of limited value). However, only 8 practices displayed information about their own complaints procedure. We appreciate that displaying the entire process may be too much information for people to digest in the waiting room, however, *some* information about how to initiate a complaint or find out more is useful - both in terms of informing people of the process but also in demonstrating openness towards feedback and complaints.

It's positive to see that two thirds of practices provide information about their complaints procedure online (27). However we could not find this information on 7 sites. We were unable to find an independent website for 3 of the practices and had some difficulty in locating 2 of the others. On 7 of the sites, some of the information we found was out of date or misleading, referring people to organisations that no longer exist.

⁶ 6 practices provided a complaints form, 4 provided a procedure, 6 provided both.

Patient participation groups (PPGs) play a key role in advising practices on their patients' perspective, and they give patients a say in how health services are delivered. For people to get involved they need information about their PPG, but we found that the majority of practices (24 of 39) do not display this in their waiting rooms.

Other considerations

Initiating a complaint is just the first part of the process. How sympathetically and efficiently it is responded to, and whether the person feels satisfied that their complaint is resolved, also affect the quality of people's experience. The issues people complain about can help to highlight areas where things could be done better. Learning from complaints is an important contribution to quality across the health system. Healthwatch Camden wants to foster an open and constructive approach to complaints about services, so that everyone will benefit from swift resolution of problems.

We think that information about the NHS complaints advocacy scheme (run by the charity VoiceAbility) to assist people who are making a complaint about local NHS services should be part and parcel of local general practice complaints procedures.

What would Healthwatch Camden like to see?

Most practices are keen for patients to complain directly either at reception or with the practice manager, and this to be encouraged as it's a good way to resolve complaints quickly and informally. However, it is important that a procedure exists for those who wish to complain in writing, or more formally. A complaints procedure and form can help bring consistency to the process and make it easier for patients.

We would like to see more practices displaying and providing this information, and for Camden CCG and Healthwatch to support them in doing so. Our recommendations are set out below:

Recommendations

Practice managers and GP partners

- To ensure that a complaints procedure and form is available online and on request at reception
- To ensure that information about how to make a complaint is displayed in waiting rooms
- To display information about their PPG in waiting rooms and online
- Sources of additional support for people with learning disabilities or sensory impairment should be clearly signposted and available

- To provide training for reception staff in handling requests or queries about complaints

Practice Participation Groups

- To check that their practice's complaints process is up to date and readily available
- To ask questions about the learning from complaints at the practice
- To make sure that people who would rather make a comment via the PPG can do so

NHS England

- To publish template complaints procedures, forms and posters which practices can adapt for their own use if they chose, including easy read versions
- To review the primary care complaints process, taking into account the cessation of a primary care PALS service
- To provide clear information on the routes to resolving a complaint in primary care
- To monitor the effectiveness of the complaints procedure, as part of performance reporting for GP practices.

Once practices have had a chance to respond to this paper we propose to take the steps set out below.

Write to Camden Clinical Commissioning Group to ask them

- To tell us how they plan to encourage good practice in complaints processes for GP practices
- To encourage its members to develop a culture of openness about and learning from complaints
- To assist practices without a website to develop one

Write to Voiceability

- To ensure that they send all practices up to date information on the NHS complaints advocacy service

We will write to Healthwatch England to ask them

- To work with NHS England to review the effectiveness of the complaints process in primary care, including general practice and to recommend improvements in it

- To work with NHS England and other partners to review the support available for people making complaints in primary care and to clarify the role of local Healthwatch in this.

What we will do:

Healthwatch Camden

- Will work with practices, patients groups and the CCG in developing forms and posters which provide up to date information on giving feedback and making complaints
- Will encourage practices to offer accessible versions of this information, including easy read format

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Appendix

Summary of key findings

Note: the visits for the mystery shopping exercise were made over a period of three weeks, at different times of day and on different days of the week. So some reception areas were busier than others when we visited. For a small number of site, the shopper was unable to gather all the information. This is indicated on the chart.

Any comparison between sites should allow for these factors.

Table key:

● = information available

○ = other form provided

* = incomplete data: either did not look at waiting room or did not speak to reception

Healthwatch Camden mystery shopping on complaints information in GP practices – November 2013 - summary of findings							
Practice	Information on how to complain on practice website	Information on how to complain on show in waiting room	Any other information on where to give feedback on show? (e.g. CQC)	Practice PPG was advertised in the waiting room	The receptionist immediately knew how to handle the request	Complaints form/procedure was provided	Action taken by receptionist
Abbey Medical Centre	●		●				No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Adelaide Medical Centre	●		●				No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Amphill practice				●		●	Provided complaints form
Bedford Square Medical Centre	●		●	●	●		No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Belsize Priory Medical Practice	●					○	Provided PALS brochure, took time to explain the service.

Bloomsbury Surgery	●	●	●		●		No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Brondesbury Medical Centre	●	●	●		●	●	Provided form and procedure quickly and explained procedure
Brookfield Park Surgery	●	●	●				No form provided. Instructed shopper to write in comments box or go directly to NHSE
Brunswick Medical Centre	●			●	●	●	Provided form and procedure quickly and explained procedure
Camden Health Improvement Practice		●	●		●	●	Provided complaints form quickly
Caversham Group Practice	●			●	●		No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Cholmley Gardens Medical Centre	●		●		●	●	Quickly provided up to date complaints procedure
Daleham Gardens Health Centre		●	●		●	●	Provided up to date form and procedure quickly and explained procedure
Fortune Green Practice	●	*	*	*	●	○	No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Four Trees Surgery							No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Gower Place Practice	●		●		●		No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Gower Street Practice			●			●	Referred shopper to practice manager
Grasse General Practice	●	*	*	*	●		No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Grays Inn Road Medical Practice	●	●	●	●	●		No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Hampstead Group Practice	●		●			●	Provided form and procedure and explained procedure
Holborn Medical Centre	●		●	●	●	●	Provided form and procedure quickly
James Wigg Group Practice			●		●	●	Provided form and procedure quickly and explained procedure
Keats Group Practice	●		●	●		●	Provided form after >5 minutes
Kings Cross Road Surgery	●	*	●	*	●	●	Provided complaints form quickly and explained process

Matthewman Practice	●		●			○	Quickly provided generic practice brochure containing information on making a complaint. Explained process
Museum Practice	●			●			No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Park End Surgery	●	*	*	*			No form provided. Referred shopper to practice manager
Parliament Hill Medical Centre		*	*	*	●		No form provided. Referred shopper to senior receptionist
Plender Street Practice					●	●	Provided form but it was out of date
Primrose Hill Surgery	●	●	●		●		No form provided. Reception referred shopper to practice manager
Prince of Wales Group Practice	●		●	●	●	●	Quickly provided complaints form
Queens Crescent Surgery			●				No form provided. Reception referred shopper to practice manager
Regents Park Practice					●	●	Provided complaints form
Rosslyn Hill Surgery	●	●	●	●	●		No form provided. Reception referred shopper to practice manger
Somers Town Medical Centre	●		●		*	*	Did not speak to reception as very busy with a queue
St Phillips Medial Centre			●				No form provided. Receptionist not aware of any complaints procedure. Advised shopper to contact NHSE
Swiss Cottage Surgery					●	●	Quickly provided complaints procedure and took time to explain it
West Hampstead Medical Centre	●		●		●	○	Quickly provided NHS Complaints Advocacy brochure but did not explain service
Westfield Medical Centre	●		●				No form provided. Reception referred shopper to practice manger



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