

Policy Briefing: An Opportunity to Improve. General Practice Complaint Handling

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Purpose of document

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has been working in partnership with the Care Quality Commission, Healthwatch England and NHS England to examine how well GP practices across England are handling feedback, concerns and complaints when things go wrong with patient care. They have published a review about this using evidence from 137 practice investigations; a literature review; workshops with GPs, practice managers and policy makers; and a survey into patients' experiences of complaining from local Healthwatch organisations.

Summary of contents

The report discusses the management of feedback, concerns and complaints within general practice. It provides a snapshot into the quality of complaint handling within general practice in 2014-15 and provides an overview of the findings based on the authors' casework and other evidence. It then goes on to discuss the key areas for improvement and the future of general practice complaint handling. Finally, the report explains how the organisations involved in the review have responded to feedback about their own complaint handling.

Summary of outcomes

The quality of general practice complaint handling is inconsistent and variable. More than half of GP practices (55%) are handling complaints well by, for example, having an easy and simple complaints process, dealing with complaints swiftly and taking them seriously. However, 45% of GP practices are falling short because of issues such as poor communication in the course of a complaint, not following guidance on handling complaints and not being honest when things go wrong. The review emphasises that in order to overcome some of the problems described, everyone across the primary care sector should focus on supporting GP practices to bring about change. Each author has made a contribution to this by stating their commitments to take action to help drive improvements in GP complaint handling.

Summary of recommendations

- Provide staff with education and training to understand and deal with feedback and complaints, along with guidance on complaints regulations and apologies.
- Nurture a culture of listening and learning among staff to openly discuss complaints and share what has been learned from other practices and patients.
- Have a clear and understandable complaints policy for all practices, and support practices to use feedback to improve patient experience.
- Practices must communicate clearly, be open and honest, and apologise when things go wrong in accordance with the statutory Duty of Candour.

Further information and resources Duty of Candour - Care Quality Commission

<http://www.cqc.org.uk/content/regulation-20-duty-candour>

Feedback and complaints/NHS complaints procedure - NHS England

<http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/complaints-and-feedback/Pages/nhs-complaints.aspx>

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