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Pickin, M., Sampson, F., Munro, J.F. et al. (1 more author) (2001) General practitioners' reasons for removing patients from their lists: postal survey in England and Wales. BMJ, 322 (7295). pp. 1158-1159. ISSN 0959-8138

https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.322.7295.1158

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General practitioners’ reasons for removing patients from their lists: postal survey in England and Wales

Mark Pickin, Fiona Sampson, James Munro, Jon Nicholl

The removal of patients from doctors’ lists causes considerable public and political concern, with speculation that patients are removed for inappropriate, including financial, reasons. In 1999 the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration noted that little evidence was available on either the frequency of, or the reasons for, removal of patients. National statistics do not distinguish between patients removed after moving out of a practice area and those removed for other reasons. Two postal surveys have reported why general practitioners might, in general, remove patients, and one small study has described the reasons doctors give for particular removals. We therefore determined the current scale of, and doctors’ reasons for, removal of patients from their lists in England and Wales.

Participants, methods, and results

In April 2000 we sent a questionnaire to 10,000 general practitioners in a random sample of practices, but to no more than one doctor per practice. Up to two reminders were sent to non-respondents at fortnightly intervals.

The questionnaire asked for the number of patients removed from the practice list in the previous six months (for reasons other than living outside the practice area), the reasons contributing to the most recent removal, and whether that removed patient was given a reason. A list of suggested reasons for removal was included (having been compiled in the light of published opinions) and, respondents were asked to indicate which of these were “primary” reasons and which others were “contributory.”

The questionnaire also asked whether target payment systems (for childhood immunisation and cervical smear testing) and financial arrangements for drug budgets and out of hours care created financial incentives for removing patients.

Of the 1000 doctors surveyed, 14 replied that they were not working in general practice. Of the remaining 986, 748 (76%) responded. In the previous six months 300 out of 745 practices (40% (95% confidence interval 37% to 44%)) had removed one or more patients. When 21 practices whose list size was not stated were excluded, 988 patients had been removed during this period from a registered population of 4.6 million, (removal rate of 4.3 (4.1 to 4.6) per 10,000 patients a year).

The primary and contributory reasons given for the most recent removal by each of these 300 practices are shown in the table. Violent, threatening, or abusive behaviour was given as a primary reason in 176 of the 300 cases (59%). Patients who moved out of a practice area or became unreachable were also often given as primary reasons.

The survey also asked doctors to rank the importance of removals because of the reasons given. A list of suggested reasons for removal was included (having been compiled in the light of published opinions) and, respondents were asked to indicate which of these were “primary” reasons and which others were “contributory.”

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300 removals (59% (53% to 64%)) and as a contributory reason in a further 24 (8%). Other primary reasons given were complaint by a patient (5 (2%) cases), non-compliance with childhood immunisation (4 (1%)), and non-compliance with cervical smear testing (2 (7%)).

In 288 of 328 (88%) cases regarding the most recent removal, the practice gave the patient a reason for the removal, either in writing (55% (157)) or in person (28% (81)).

About half of general practitioners believed that the target payment systems for childhood immunisation (370/732) and cervical smear testing (360/732) had created financial incentives to remove patients. Smaller, but still substantial, proportions of respondents considered that financial arrangements for practice drug budgets (295/728) and out of hours care (321/733) also created such incentives.

Comment

General practitioners report that violent, threatening, or abusive behaviour by patients is their most common reason for removing a patient from their list. Non-compliance with childhood immunisation or cervical smear testing was rarely reported as a reason, and never as the sole reason, for removal despite the perceived financial incentives for removal.

The validity of our findings depends on doctors being able and willing to identify and report the number of removals and their reasons for them. If our respondents were unaware of all removals from the practice or were not truthful about why they removed patients, our findings will misrepresent the situation. Moreover, patients may have different views of the events leading to removal, which future research should seek to understand.

We thank Stuart Drage, Peter Corpe, and Bernard Horan for their valuable advice and assistance.

Contributors: MP contributed to the study design, helped to write the survey, and analysed the data. FS administered the survey, contributed to data analysis, and helped to write the paper. JM designed the study, contributed to the analysis, and wrote the paper. JN contributed to the study design, data analysis, and helped to write the paper. MP is the guarantor for the paper.

Competing interests: None declared.

Funding: This work was funded by the Department of Health. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Health.


(Accepted 8 March 2001)

One hundred years ago

After-dinner speeches

After-dinner speaking out of the mouths of some few practitioners becomes a science, and nothing can better promote digestion than to set back “serenely full” and listen to the founded periods and elaborate impromptus of someone whose natural gifts have been cultivated by art. Genius has been defined, wrongly we think, as the faculty of taking pains, but there is no doubt that whoever wishes to excel in post-prandial oratory must adopt this course, the absence of which caused the failure of the Vicar of Wakefield’s family portrait. On minor occasions anyone possessing a fluent tongue, and knowledge and nerve, and a pinch of the Attic salt of humour will probably speak best on the spur of the moment, but trusting to inspiration may sometimes prove a broken reed, and those who have to obey the orders of the toast master when important issues are at stake may be advised to make more or less careful preparation. When the late Sir James Paget had to deliver an important speech he might be met in the Regent’s Park pacing round and round, and rehearsing his performance; and Charles Dickens, facile princeps with his tongue as with his pen, would walk miles over Hampstead Heath declaiming and gesticulating when he had to take the chair at a public dinner. On the other hand, over-elongation becomes a positive evil when it leads to the production and infliction of long dreary harangues which must be continued to their bitter end, with scantly regard to the comfort of the long-suffering audience.

(BMJ 1901;i:910)