



Doctors' orders in a changing environment

The tenth Aviva Health of the Nation Index

July 2011

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Introduction

First published in 2003, Aviva's Health of the Nation Index is a comprehensive bi-annual study of GPs' views of the Health Service, their own practices, trends they are seeing in the UK's health problems and patients' attitudes towards their own health.

Over the next few years, the NHS is going to undergo the most sustained funding squeeze it has experienced since it was first introduced 63 years ago.

In this, tenth report we re-visit some of the questions from our first study to see how the environment has changed – if at all. With the advent of clinical commissioning groups and increased customer choice, GPs are critical to the success of this change – so we've also canvassed their opinion on the new commissioning process. In addition, we shine a spotlight on mental health provision, which nearly half (45%) of GPs feel is going to be the biggest health issue that they'll need to treat this year.

The results are thought provoking and provide an incisive commentary on the position of healthcare at this moment in time, as well as an insight into how GPs are feeling about the future of the health service.

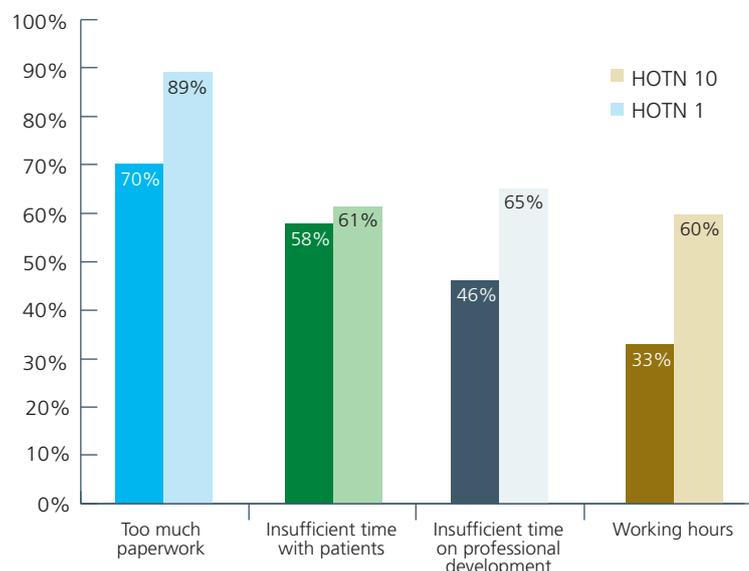
Headline findings

Budget restrictions, easy access to services, education and support – these critical factors are all impacting heavily on the quality of service that GPs are able to provide. Yet, despite these challenges, our research underlines the fact GPs still want to do the best by their patients by giving them the time they need and facilitating access to appropriate care.

A GP's work-life

- **GPs are time poor** – around three in five (58%) express concerns that they don't have enough time to spend with their patients. 67% believe longer appointments would greatly improve their patients' experiences.
- **Other concerns focus on patient issues** – 79% express concerns that they have to deal with patients who have unrealistic expectations, and 48% are concerned that they're dealing with patients who do not look after themselves.

GPs' key concerns – time pressures

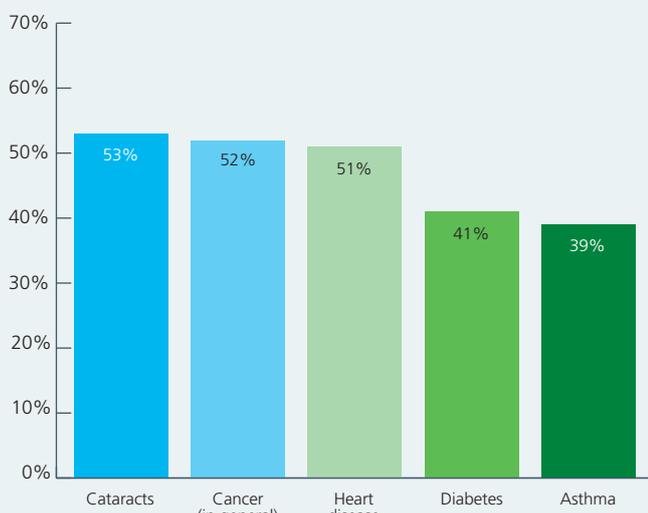


- **GPs work an average of 31-50 hours a week, carrying out 101-150 appointments in that time** - the majority are conducted face-to-face, and nearly half the GPs we spoke to (46%) carry out fewer than 25 telephone consultations a week.
- **54% of GPs believe their working hours will increase over the next 5 years.**
- **48% of GPs expressed a moderate level of job satisfaction** – a view relatively consistent with our first Health of the Nation study in 2003.

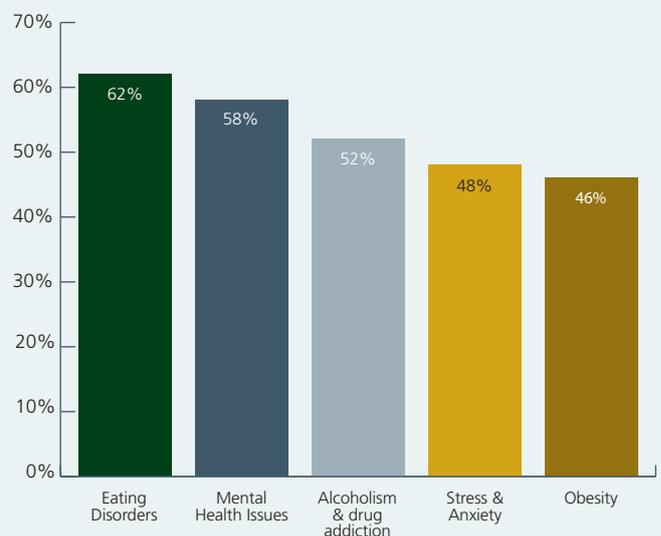
Quality of care is still a concern

- 50% of GPs worry about the quality of care provided by the UK health sector.
- **There's enormous variation in the quality of care made available for different conditions.** For us, this confirms that there's still some way to go for the Government to meet its aims regarding a reduction in the variation of clinical care.

Top 5 conditions which GPs feel the NHS provides a good service for people



Top 5 conditions which GPs feel the NHS provides a poor service for people



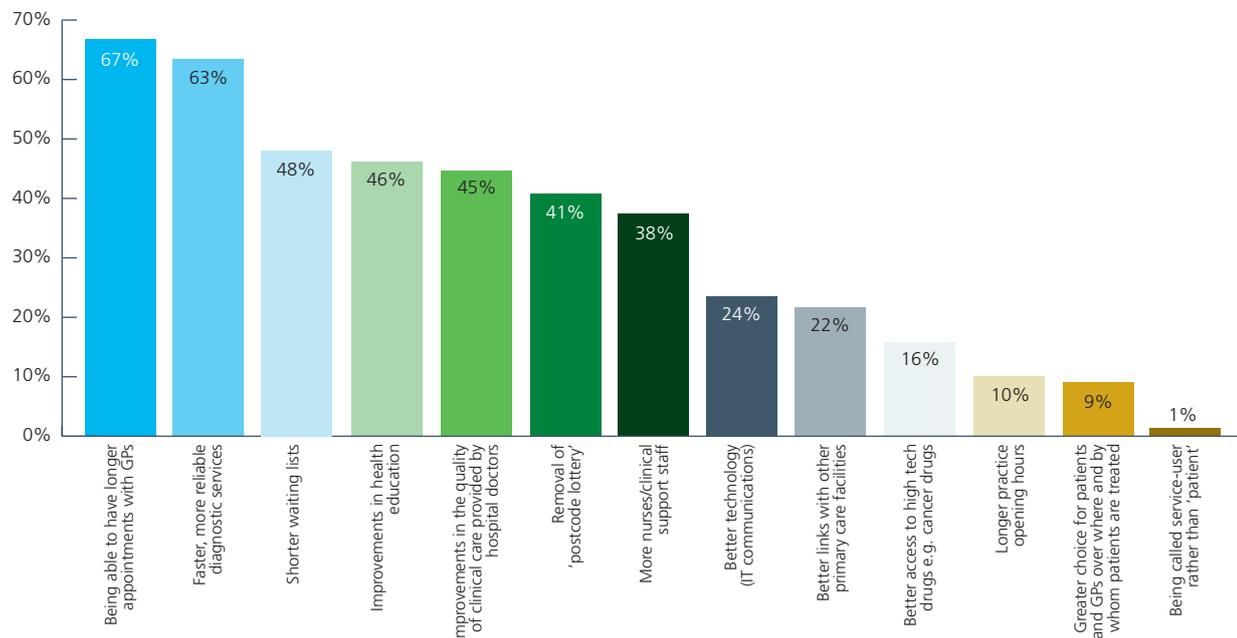
- **53% worry about lack of support for the ageing population** and the same amount worry about lack of support for mental health issues.
- 70% of GPs have seen an increase in patients suffering from stress over the past five years and **45% expect stress to be the biggest health issue they'll treat this year.**
- **66% of GPs don't feel equipped to deal with social care issues.** One in five don't feel that social care issues are their responsibility.



What do GPs think would improve their patients' experiences?

- Of those factors that GPs feel would improve their patient-oriented services, **longer appointment times (67%) and faster, more reliable, diagnostics services (63%) rank most highly.**

Which, if any, of the following do you believe would greatly improve your patients' experiences of the health service?



- **GPs also recognise the importance of prevention** - 46% say that better health education for patients would improve their experience of the health service.
- Despite the Government's ambitions to improve customer choice, **less than one in ten GPs (9%) feel that a greater choice for patients would improve the service they receive.**

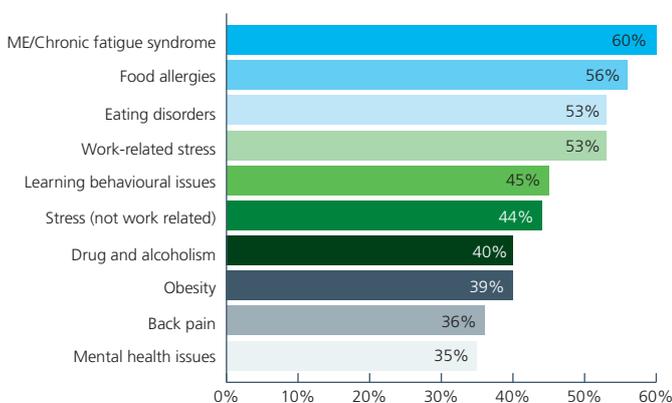
When asked about mental health specifically:

- 65% say that the best way to improve mental health provision would be through better support services from the NHS.
- 57% feel that more investment should be made into mental health provision.
- Nearly half (45%) of GPs say their services could be improved if they had more time with patients.
- 41% feel that there should be less reliance on drugs as a catch-all solution.

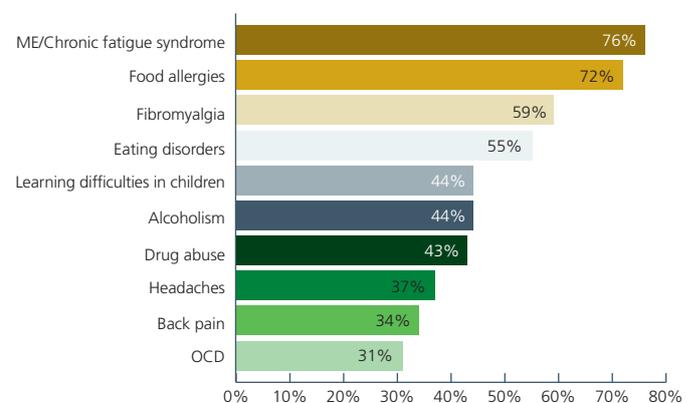
GPs still have problems referring patients for treatment:

- GPs have the most difficulty making referrals for ME (60%), food allergies (56%), workplace stress (53%) and patients with obesity issues (40%).

The top ten conditions identified in our 2011 research for which referrals are difficult



The top ten conditions identified in our 2003 research for which referrals are difficult



- **Despite a doubling in healthcare spend over the last ten years, budget remains a key concern** - 55% of GPs say that current budget rules prevent them from offering patients the service they need.
- 42% say that they haven't been able to refer patients for treatment because it isn't available to them in their area, or waiting lists are closed.

Conclusions

In this, our tenth Health of the Nation report, findings show clearly that GPs are determined to help and support their patients, offering the best possible care at all times. However, almost half – 46% - of the GPs we spoke to expressed an opinion that health education should improve, to not only help patients understand conditions and clinical pathways, but also take responsibility for and better manage their own health. If, as a nation, we would like to achieve world-class clinical outcomes through our health service, that aim will depend in some part on empowering and supporting GPs as they work towards attaining those objectives.

There are some simple, important steps that could help strengthen GP / patient relationships and address some of the challenges that we've identified here – such as giving patients more say in their care and promoting education around health and wellbeing. However, in the current environment this is still a challenge, particularly in relation to treating mental health and the more complex conditions that demand a physical and psychological perspective.

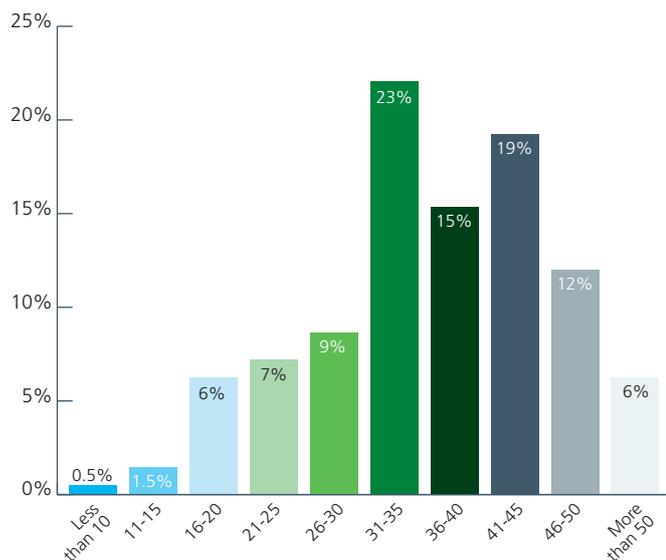
The GP practice

To build up a picture of a GPs working week, we asked a number of questions relating to working hours and how their time is spent. Not surprisingly, our results show a mixed picture across our sample, with working hours and the number of consultations GPs carry out varying dramatically.

However, in order to provide a benchmark, we've calculated the average hours worked by GPs across our sample. Based on this approach, our research shows that GPs work on average 36 hours a week.

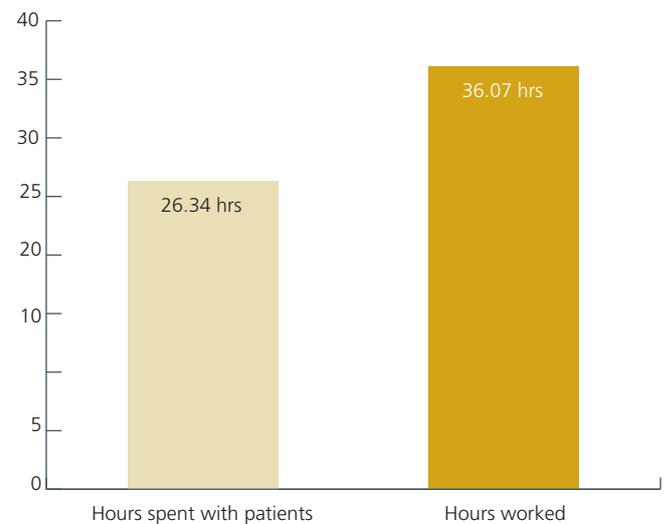
This is broken down as follows:

Number of hours worked



How much time do GPs spend with their patients?

GP's week: Average number of hours worked vs average number of hours spent with patients



GPs work on average 36 hours a week.

The average time spent with patients is 26 hours 34 minutes.

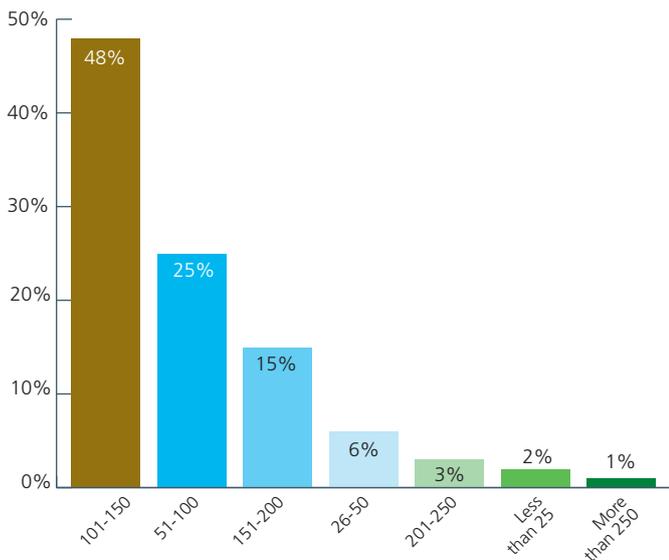
How many appointments do GPs hold each week?

Our research shows that:

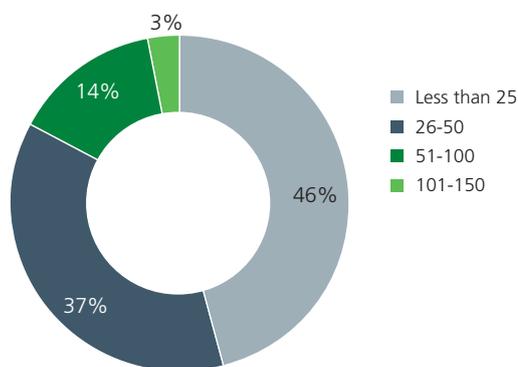
- Nearly half of the GPs we spoke to (48%) carry out between 101-150 appointments a week
- Just under half (46%) carry out fewer than 25 telephone consultations a week

Current patient appointments

Q. How many patient appointments do you carry out a week?



Q. How many telephone consultations do you carry out a week?



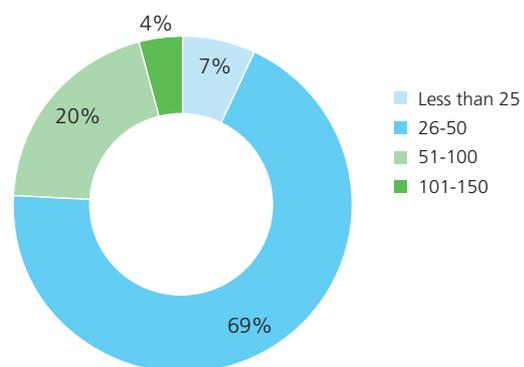
58% of GPs worry that they don't have enough time to spend with their patients.

A note about appointment times

Despite it being current practice to schedule doctors' appointments for 10 minutes each, previous research conducted by Aviva shows that GPs want more time with their patients. This is a view reflected by 67% of GPs taking part in our Health of the Nation research.

Nearly all of the GPs (97%) questioned in Aviva's Health of the Workplace 4 research (April 2010) said that they would like to spend 11 minutes or more with each patient. Moreover, nearly seven in ten (69%) GPs would like up to 15 minutes to see each patient and a quarter want 16 minutes or more.

In an ideal world, how much time would you like to set aside to see each patient?



How will working hours change in the future?

When asked how they feel that their working hours will change over the next 5 years, over half of GPs (54%) say that they will rise and a third (33%) feel that they will stay the same. Only 5% feel that they will fall.

How is a GP's time spent over a typical working week?

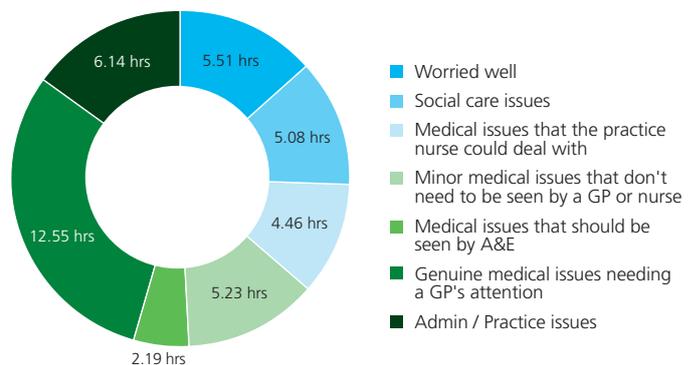
Medical issues requiring a GPs attention

Reassuringly, our research suggests that GPs spend the majority of their time dealing with medical issues that require a GP's attention. A GP is sometimes thought of as a counsellor or a confidante – and in many cases, appointments made in that vein are as important as physical treatment – but our study shows, there's still an element of GP engagement that could possibly be better served by raising awareness of the management of general health issues among the population.

The issues that could be dealt with by someone other than a GP range from minor medical problems (such as treatment of verrucae), to issues that do not necessarily require immediate, specialist medical intervention (such as long-term care appraisals). While these are still very important for the patients, they can be a drain on the surgery's resource. In future, it is hoped that issues impinging on GPs' time could be better addressed by a GP-assisted programme of community awareness.

How is a GP's time spent over a typical working week?

Average time spent on task



67% of GPs believe being able to have longer appointment times would greatly improve their patients' experiences.

“Our research reveals that GPs want to offer the best possible levels of care. To do this, they need to be able to spend the appropriate length of time with each patient and be confident that they can offer prompt access to the facilities and support their patients' need. ”

Dr Doug Wright, head of clinical development, Aviva UK Health

Our research shows that on average GPs split their time as follows:

Minor medical issues

88% of the GPs we questioned say that they spend up to a quarter of their time dealing with minor medical issues that don't need to be seen by either a nurse or a GP. This is split as follows:

- 45% say that they spend between 1-10% of their time dealing with minor medical issues
- 43% say that they spend between 11-25% of their time dealing with minor medical issues.

Medical issues that a practice nurse could deal with

Nearly all of the GPs (94%) taking part in our research say that they spend up to a quarter of their time dealing with medical issues that a practice nurse could deal with.

This is split as follows:

- 47% spend between 1-10% of their time dealing with medical issues that a practice nurse could deal with
- 47% spend between 11-25% of their time dealing with medical issues that a practice nurse could deal with.

Medical issues that should be seen by A&E

Our research clearly shows that the majority of GPs (90%) spend very little time dealing with medical issues that should be dealt with by A&E. Only one in ten spends between 11-25% of their time dealing with these issues.

Worried well

Nearly nine in ten (87%) estimate that they spend up to a quarter of their time dealing with anxious patients who are otherwise well.

While 38% of GPs estimate that the worried well only take up between 1-10% of their time, just over one in ten (11%) estimate that they spend between 26-50% of their time dealing with otherwise healthy people.

Admin/practice issues

All GPs say that they spend less than 50% of their time dealing with admin issues.

The highest proportion (55%) estimate that they spend between 11-25% of their time dealing with admin issues. Nearly a third (30%) spends between 1-10% of their time and 15% spend between 26-50% of their time dealing with admin.

Social Care

Findings varied across our sample. While, 45% of GPs estimate that they spend between 1-10% of their time dealing with social care issues, an additional 46% estimate that they spend twice as much time (between 11-25%) on these issues.

66% of GPs do not feel equipped to deal with social care issues. A further 20% do not feel that it is their job to manage issues of this nature.

Do you like your job?

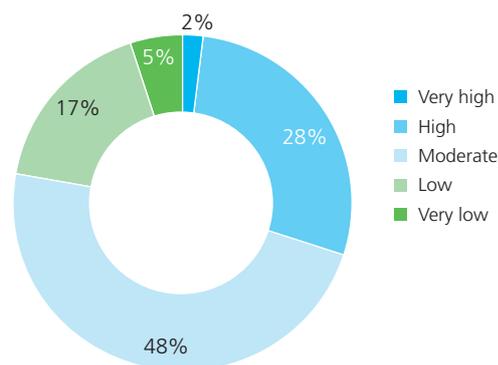
Nearly a third of GPs (30%) express a high or very high level of job satisfaction. This remains relatively consistent across the different age groups. However, it is interesting that fewer female doctors feel this to be the case with only 22% stating high or very high levels of satisfaction.

Interestingly, general feeling amongst GPs has stayed fairly constant over the past eight years, with 45% of those questioned in our first survey saying that they had a moderate level of job satisfaction; in 2011, this was 48%.

While levels of satisfaction are fairly consistent across most regions the research shows the following:

- GPs based in Wales are the most satisfied with 44% saying they are either highly or very highly satisfied. This compares to an average of 32%.
- GPs based in Scotland and Northern Ireland have the lowest levels of job satisfaction with 27% of GPs in Scotland and 30% of those based in Northern Ireland saying that their levels of satisfaction are low, compared to an average of 22%.
- 16% of GPs based in the South East say that their levels of satisfaction are very low, compared to an average of 5%.

How satisfied are you in your job?



GPs' key concerns about their industry

Our research has identified a number of areas of concern:

1. Patient issues

Not surprisingly, patient issues drive a number of the key concerns. Dealing with patients who have unrealistic expectations (79%) tops the list of concerns across all categories. This was also a key concern identified in Aviva's first Health of the Nation report in 2003 where 84% of GPs highlighted this as a significant cause of dissatisfaction.

Worryingly, a quarter (24%) of GPs say that one of their key concerns is dealing with aggressive or threatening behaviour against themselves and others.

Nearly half (48%) of GPs say that they're concerned that they have to deal with patients who don't look after themselves. While this has fallen ten percentage points from 58% in our 2003 study, it suggests that there's still more to be done to educate patients on wellness management.

When we asked GPs whether they feel that their patients educate themselves about their condition before they visit the surgery, the results were mixed. The most popular estimate from GPs, accounting for 26% of those questioned, suggests that between 6-10% of patients find out about their condition before they visit the GP.

Over three quarters of GPs (76%) believe that patients who have educated themselves about their condition have helped improve the quality of decisions made about their healthcare and benefited their health.

2. Time pressure

Consistent with Aviva's first Health of the Nation report of eight years ago, time pressures remain a main cause for concern for GPs. High levels of paperwork continues to be the main concern for 70% of GPs. Hand in hand with this, nearly six in ten GPs (58%) worry that they don't have enough time to spend with their patients.

Just under half of GPs (46%) are concerned that they don't have sufficient time to dedicate to professional development. And, 39% worry that they don't have time to look after themselves – all of which are key to them providing a high level service for their patients.

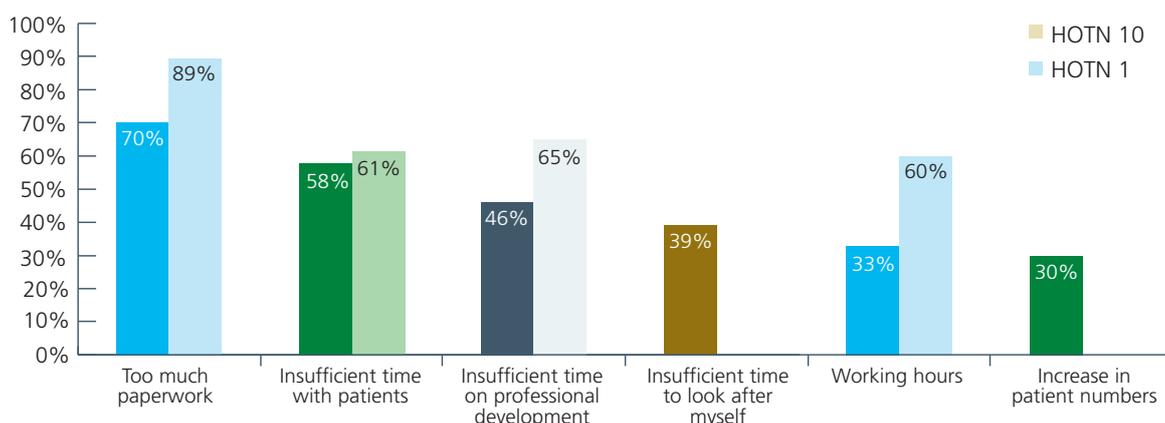
These frustrations clearly demonstrate the GP's commitments to their patients. It's therefore not surprising that quality of care also figures highly on their list of concerns.

What can be done to help ease time pressures?

As we've seen earlier in this report, nearly all of the GPs (93%) taking part in our research say that they spend up to a quarter of their time dealing with medical issues that a practice nurse could deal with. When this is considered alongside time spent dealing with minor issues not requiring a GP or nurse's attention, social care issues and the 'worried well,' we can begin to identify areas which - with the right patient education - could help free-up GPs' time.

With the right education, patients can choose the right support services for their own personal circumstances. This in turn will help to enable GPs (and indeed our A&E departments) to focus on providing the appropriate advice and support to the patients who need it most.

GPs' key concerns – time pressures



3. NHS reform

Given the high degree of change planned for the NHS over the next few years it's not surprising that 70% of GPs cited NHS reform as their key concern.

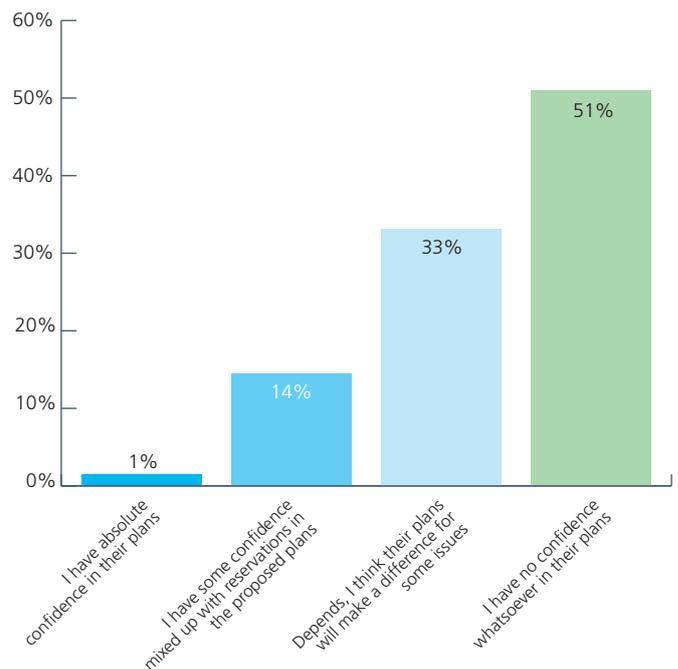
When asked specifically about commissioning, three in five (60%) GPs say that they don't feel that the approach will yield the savings that the Government plans. In fact across our whole sample, only 6% feel that it will make considerable savings to the NHS bill.

44% of GPs are bold enough to say that commissioning would destroy the NHS. As an indication of GPs' moods and feelings towards the proposed reforms, this is a loud signal to the Government that perhaps their changes could still benefit from input that's drawn directly from the front line.

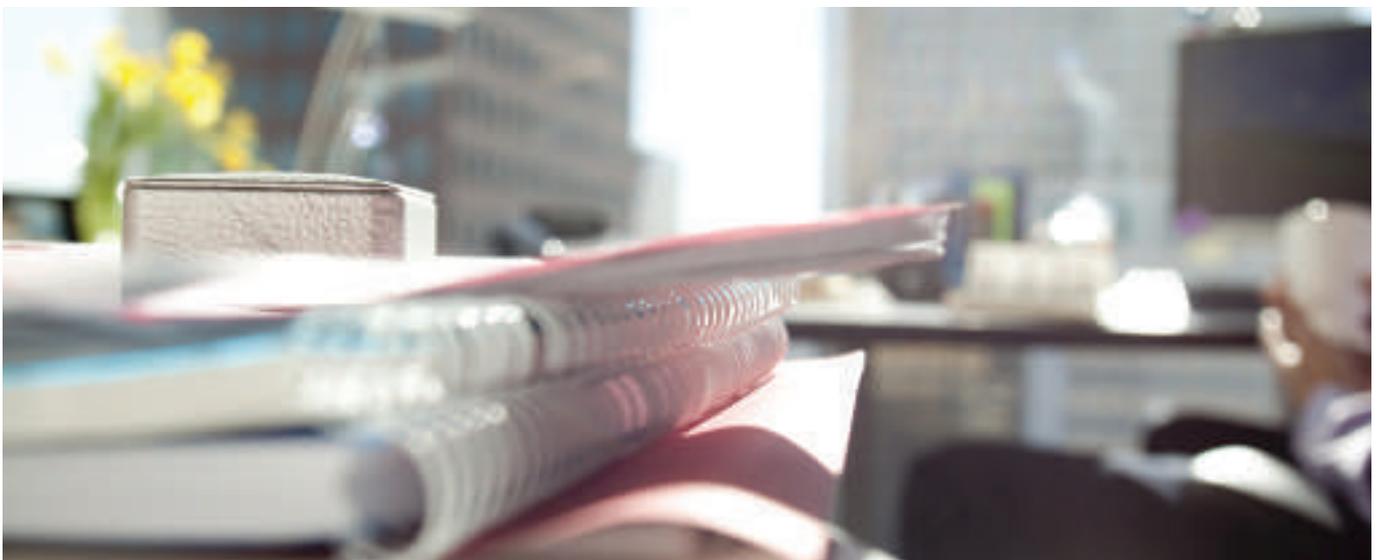
A third (33%) are more favourable saying it's a bold reform but they do not feel equipped to deliver it.

Interestingly 44% of GPs stressed that the approach wouldn't work without them being given the appropriate training – a lesson learnt from the Government's introduction of Fit Notes.

How confident are you in the Government's GP commissioning plans?



51% of GPs have no confidence in the Government's commissioning plans.



How could life as a doctor change?

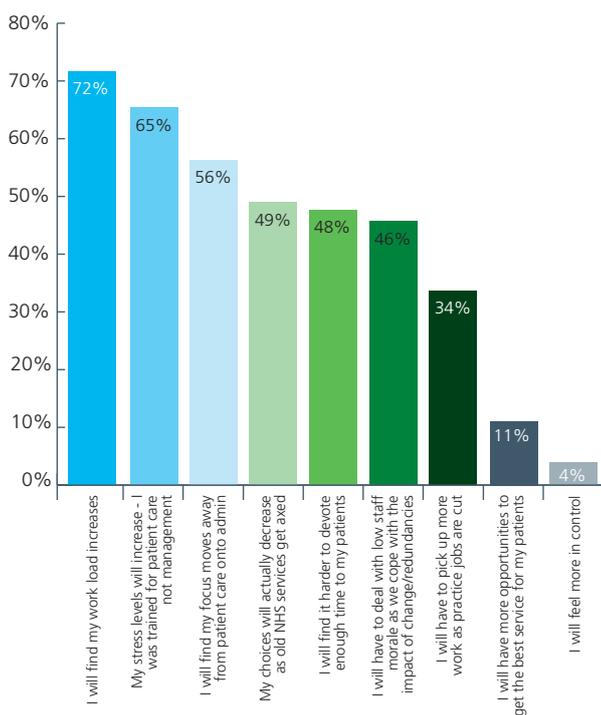
As a result of the proposed changes, over one in five (22%) of GPs are planning to take early retirement. This is considerably higher than the 14% identified in the BMA's national survey of GP opinion, 2011. Another 18% of all the GPs we spoke to are planning to reduce their working hours.

GPs expect to see some significant changes to their life as a doctor as a result of commissioning. Over 70% of GPs (71%) feel that commissioning will increase their already busy workload and 66% feel that it will increase their stress levels.

Worryingly nearly three in five GPs (56%) feel that commissioning will shift their focus from patient care onto administration. Just one in ten (11%) feel that it will give them more opportunities to get the best service for patients. Similarly 48% feel that they will find it harder to devote time to patient care.

GPs also have concerns about making referrals under the new arrangement with nearly half (49%) feeling that their choices will actually decrease as old NHS services get axed.

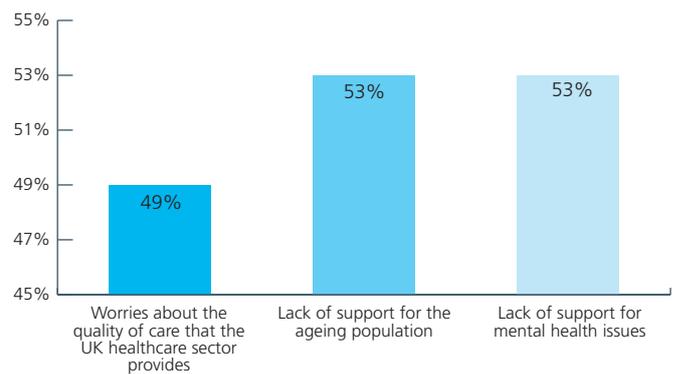
Under new plans for commissioning, which of the following reflect how you feel your life as a doctor will change?



Only about one in ten (11%) of GPs feel that the Government's proposed changes will give them more opportunities to get the best service for their patients.

4. Quality and access to care

GPs' key concerns - quality of care



Half of the GPs we spoke to feel that quality of care in the NHS is a key concern. Interestingly, this figure has fallen from 84% in our first Health of the Nation report (2003), suggesting that GPs feel that the quality of care provided by the NHS has improved over the past eight years.

This is particularly true for conditions such as cancer, which is reflected in this report. However, the quality of care provided for specific conditions such as mental health issues (53%) and support for the ageing population (53%) still remains an issue.

It's re-assuring to see that the Government recognises this and is already taking steps to find solutions to address the issues.

Budget still acts as a barrier to care

Budget still appears to be an issue with 55% of GPs saying that current budgetary rules prevent them from offering patients the service that they believe they should get. This figure rises to 80% for those based in Northern Ireland, 73% for GPs based in the South East and 71% for GPs based in the West Midlands. Fewer GPs based in the South West (39%) and East Midlands (41%) have budgetary concerns.

This is particularly true for the following conditions:

- Infertility treatment
- Counselling/psychotherapies
- Bariatric surgery
- Obesity surgery/advice
- Varicose vein surgery
- Dermatology
- Orthopaedics/musculoskeletal pain/surgery.

The number of GPs citing budget as an issue has remained fairly constant since Aviva's 2003 Health of the Nation report, only falling five percentage points from 60% to 55%. Worryingly, there are still instances where GPs have not been able to access a service either because they can't provide it or a waiting list is closed. Two in five GPs (42%) say that they have experienced this problem. Examples they gave include:

- Counselling/CBT
- Varicose vein surgery
- Spinal injury/pain clinic/spinal injections
- Obesity
- Bariatric surgery
- Eating disorders
- Podiatry

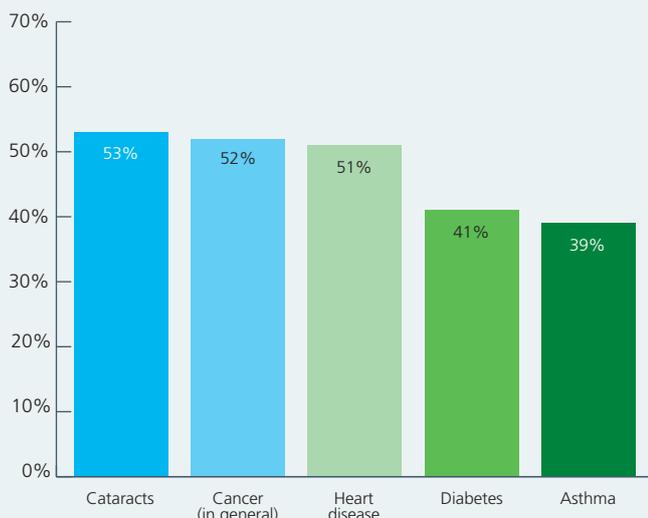
Quality of care for specific conditions

GPs rate the service for the following conditions as follows:

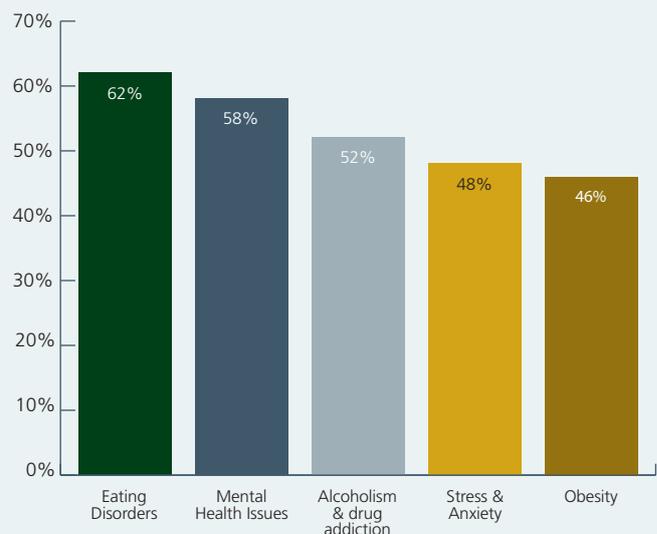
| Condition | % of GPs who feel that their local NHS provides a good service | % of GPs who feel that their local NHS provides a poor service |
|---|--|--|
| Alcoholism and drug addiction | 6% | 52% |
| Alzheimer's and dementia | 8% | 34% |
| Arthritis | 14% | 20% |
| Asthma | 39% | 6% |
| Cancer (in general) | 52% | 3% |
| Cataracts | 53% | 2% |
| Children with learning difficulties | 7% | 39% |
| Diabetes | 41% | 9% |
| Eating disorders | 5% | 62% |
| Heart disease | 51% | 3% |
| Hip/knee replacement | 37% | 8% |
| Infertility | 18% | 26% |
| Depression | 11% | 44% |
| Mental health issues | 6% | 58% |
| Flu | 19% | 11% |
| Stress/anxiety | 9% | 48% |
| Musculoskeletal conditions | 20% | 14% |
| People wanting health advice to get healthy | 14% | 21% |
| Stroke | 38% | 6.25% |
| Obesity | 4% | 46% |

Interestingly, the trends are similar to those identified in our first report.

Top 5 conditions which GPs feel the NHS provides a good service for people



Top 5 conditions which GPs feel the NHS provides a poor service for people



The results show quite a clear split in what is and isn't working, according to GPs. Cancer services are perceived to be performing well and the NHS is perceived to be providing a good service for conditions such as heart disease and stroke.

But GPs feel that the NHS is letting a number of patients down in its quality of care. This is particularly true where patients are suffering from mental health conditions, drug and alcohol addiction, stress and eating disorders. Children with learning difficulties and the elderly with Alzheimer's are also thought to be receiving a poor service. With mental health issues such as stress on the increase and the number of elderly set to rise it would appear that the NHS still has a lot to do to keep up with the changes in demand both now and in the future.

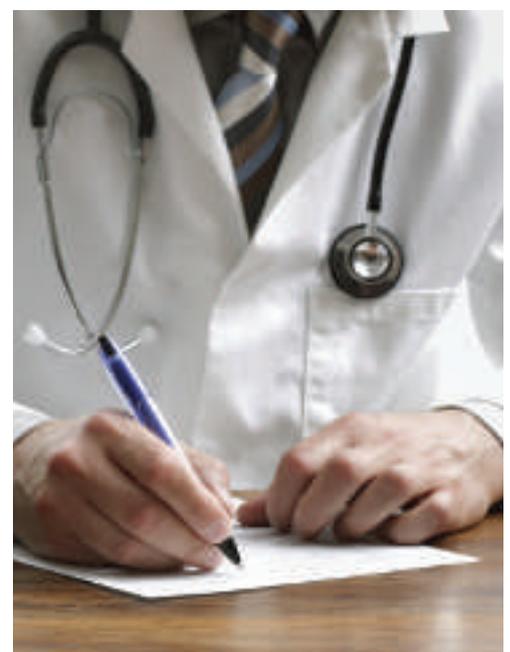
Referrals

Consistent with our first report from 2003, very few patients are referred for out-of-area-treatment. Seven in ten GPs (70%) say that only between 1-10% of their patients are referred for treatment outside their area.

In most cases GPs know where to refer their patient for treatment. However, one in ten GPs say that in a quarter to a half of cases (26-50%) they have difficulty identifying an appropriate consultant. This is likely to be for more complex conditions that are not as simple to diagnose.

Patients tend to be referred to a department rather than a named consultant with 70% of GPs referring a patient to a specific consultant in only 1-10% of cases.

Once a patient has been referred, GPs can generally get in contact with the consultant to discuss the patient. However, eight in ten GPs say that they have difficulty in between 1-25% of cases.



Difficulty making referrals

Our research identifies that there are a range of conditions that GPs have difficulty making referrals for. This is particularly the case when they are faced with patients with undefined mental health issues, or conditions that display a mixture of physical and psychological symptoms.

Interestingly, our 2011 results have remained very consistent with those identified in our 2003 study where the top ten conditions for which GPs have difficulty making appropriate referrals were identified as follows:

| | The top ten conditions identified in our 2011 research for which referrals are difficult | The top ten conditions identified in our 2003 research for which referrals are difficult |
|----|--|--|
| 1 | ME/Chronic fatigue syndrome (60%) | Chronic fatigue syndrome (76%) |
| 2 | Food allergies (56%) | Food allergies (72%) |
| 3 | Eating disorders (53%) | Fibromyalgia (59%) |
| 4 | Work-related stress (53%) | Eating disorders (55%) |
| 5 | Learning behavioural issues (45%) | Learning difficulties in children (44%) |
| 6 | Stress (not work related) (44%) | Alcoholism (44%) |
| 7 | Drug and alcoholism (40%) | Drug abuse (43%) |
| 8 | Obesity (40%) | Headaches (37%) |
| 9 | Back pain (36%) | Back pain (34%) |
| 10 | Mental health issues (35%) | OCD (31%) |

Worryingly, GPs are increasingly being faced with patients with the above conditions, making it important that solutions are put in place to address the current issues.

Stress (70%) and depression (67%) top the list of conditions that GPs have seen an increase in over the past year. Moreover, GPs estimate that stress (45%) will be the biggest health issue that they will treat in 2011.

Private referrals

When referring patients for treatment in the private sector 71% of GPs offer their patients a choice of consultant and 70% offer a choice of hospital in all cases. Similar to NHS referrals, 85% of GPs are willing to make an open referral where necessary.

Quality of service plays a key role in a GP's decision-making process when they are making a private referral. Only one in ten (11%) of GPs say that cost of treatment affects their decision.

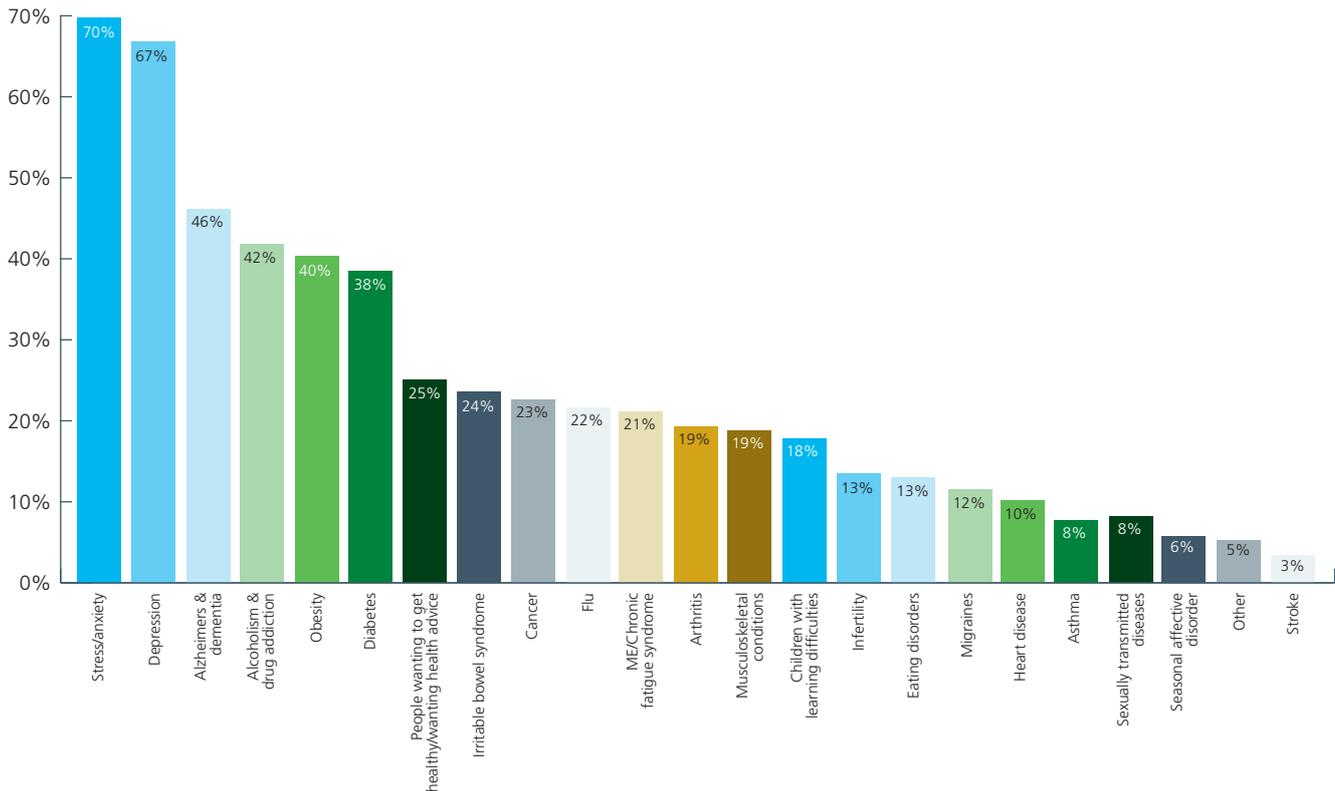
The main considerations GPs make when referring a patient for private treatment are as follows:

- Reputation of consultant (78%)
- Convenience of location (63%)
- Patient experience (57%)
- Speed of access (55%)
- Reputation of hospital (41%)
- Clinical outcome (28%)

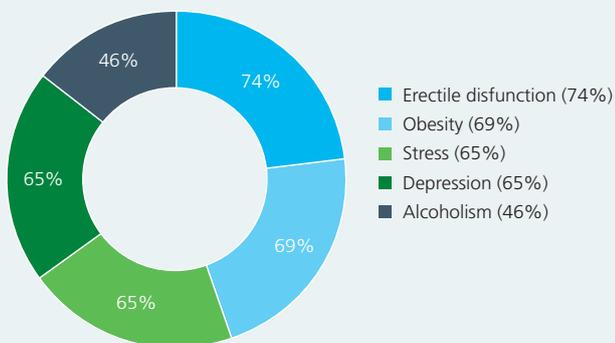
59% of GPs think that the NHS should make more use of private healthcare facilities, but not at the expense of the NHS.

Trends in the UK's health problems – as seen in the doctor's surgery

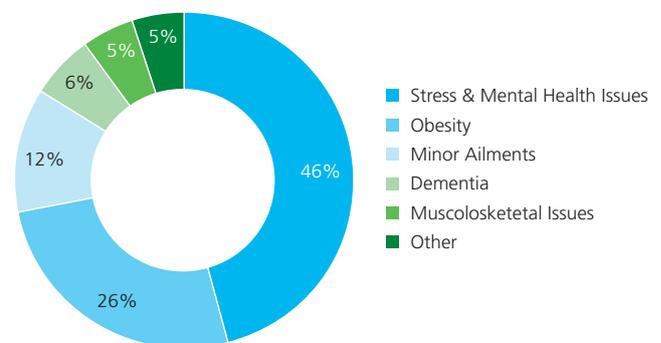
Have you noticed an increase in patients reporting any of the following conditions in the past year?



Conditions seeing the biggest increase in diagnosis as identified by our 1st Health of the Nation report (2003):



Which of the following is the biggest health issue you'll treat over the next year?



What would improve patients' experiences of the health service?

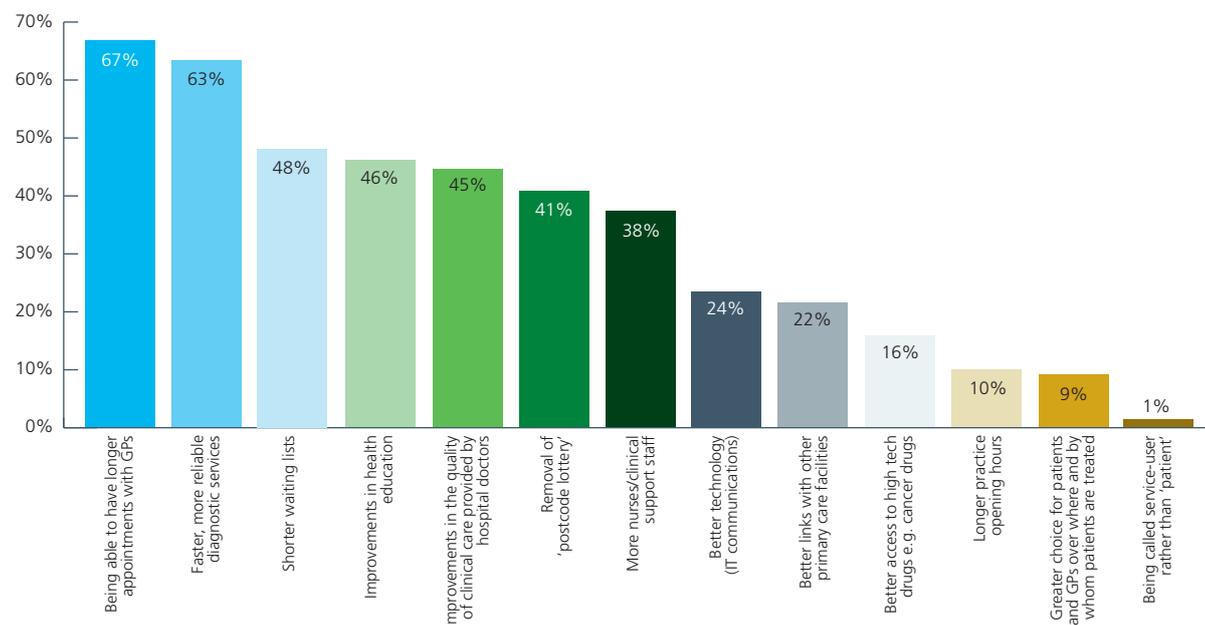
The top things that GPs feel would improve the service that they give to their patients are:

- Being able to have longer appointments (67%)
- Faster more reliable diagnostics service (63%)
- Shorter waiting lists (48%)
- Improvements in the quality of clinical care (45%)
- The removal of the postcode lottery (41%)

Nearly half of GPs (46%) recognise that health education for patients also needs to improve. Offering better health education may not only help the patient understand their condition but also helps the patient better manage their health.

Despite being a main focus for the Government, only 9% of GPs feel that improving a patient's choice of where and by who they are treated would improve the patient's experience.

Which, if any, of the following do you believe would greatly improve your patients' experiences of the health service?



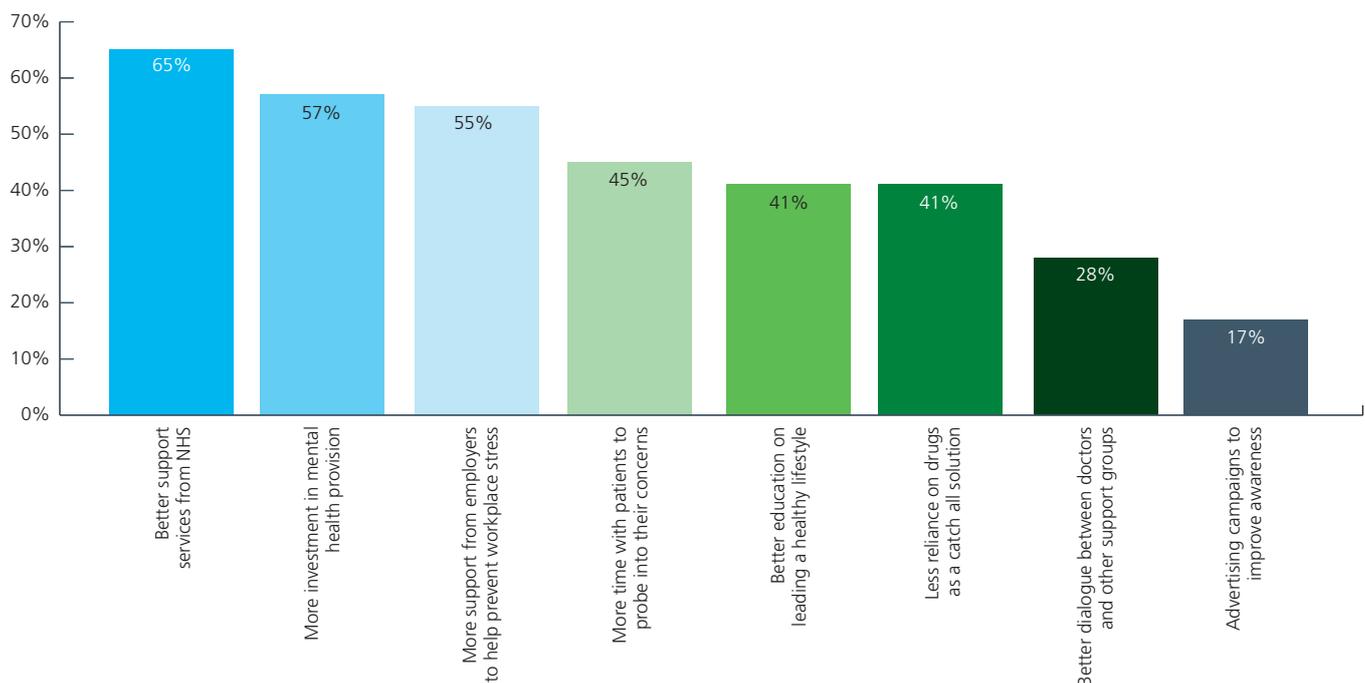
Improving support for patients with mental health issues

When asked specifically about mental health, 65% of GPs say that they feel that the best way to improve mental health provision is through better support services from the NHS. Nearly three in five GPs (57%) feel that more investment needs to be made in mental health provision.

Interestingly, over half of GPs say that employers should offer their employees more support to help prevent workplace stress. Better education (41%) was also felt to be key.

As with other medical conditions, time constraints are felt to be hindering the support GPs can offer patients with mental health issues. Nearly half of GPs (45%) say that the service they provide could be improved if they had more time with their patients and 41% feel that there should be less reliance on drugs as a catch all solution.

Which of the following do you think could be done to improve mental health provision?



“Our research re-emphasises that there are two issues to overcome to help improve the quality of care available to patients with mental health conditions. Firstly, there’s a need for increased investment into mental health support services. There’s also a need for improved education about mental health issues – in terms of prevention, recognition of symptoms and acceptance of the illness. Employers have a key role to play in this process.”

Dr Doug Wright, head of clinical development, Aviva UK Health

Health of the Nation 2011 – what does it tell us?

Our survey shows that there's a great deal of synergy between what GPs want and what the Government would like to achieve through its Health and Social Care Bill. In some ways this is reassuring: GPs are ideally places to see how the NHS is serving the public, and – where patients are concerned, at least – both views are aligned with all parties recognising the need to implement significant changes in both the short and long term.

GPs need more support and more time

Most importantly, however, our research also reveals a number of issues that aren't currently being tackled as part of the health reforms.

Notably, it would appear that there's still a long way to go in educating and encouraging people to take more responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, using available medical services more intuitively and effectively, and supporting GPs so that they can spend more, quality time with their patients.

In fact, over half the GPs we spoke to – 58% – said they had concerns over the amount of time available during their working day that could be spent talking to patients. Worryingly, nearly three in five felt that commissioning burdens would further shift the focus from patient care to administrative tasks. Significantly, 48% said they would find it harder to devote more time to their patients in the future.

Quality services for all

From our work, it's clear that – in general – GPs feel the NHS provides a good service when it comes to serious conditions such as cancer, stroke and heart disease. However, a continuing theme in our Health of the Nation reports centres on concerns for the inadequate provision of mental health services. This is particularly true in the case of conditions that aren't easy to diagnosis, such as chronic fatigue syndrome and stress where patients have both physical and mental symptoms.



It's these conditions that are causing GPs the most problems when it comes to making a referral for further diagnostic tests and treatment. In some cases, the support just isn't available and – where it is – waiting lists are often lengthy. With 54% of GPs saying that stress will be the biggest health issue they will treat in 2011, unfortunately the situation is only set to deteriorate.

To make matters worse, the conditions that are appearing with more frequency in the GPs' surgeries are precisely those that appear to be poorly supported by the NHS – such as obesity and stress.

These conditions still require concerted action for there to be an improvement across the nation's general health and that involves not only greater support afforded to GPs, but also personal education and employer involvement.

The good news is that the Government has recognised these issues, and is taking steps to improve mental health provision, at least, as part of its health agenda. However, with budgets being strained to the hilt, it's clear that the Government needs to look beyond the NHS to achieve its mission statement of 'better health for all'.

Possible solutions could include more use of private healthcare providers; educating the public – improving information dissemination at every opportunity, from early school age upwards – and increasing the awareness of health and health-issues among employers of every size. Unfortunately, GPs continue to prescribe drugs – a situation they acknowledge as being far from ideal – to treat conditions such as stress, because there is no other prompt support available for the conditions they're treating. This is a situation that must change.

Concerns about Government reform

While the Government's listening exercise has allayed many fears about changes to the commissioning landscape, nearly three quarters (71%) of GPs feel that commissioning will increase their already busy workloads and 66% feel that it will increase their stress levels.

Perhaps one of the most revealing insights from our survey comes from the attitude of our GPs as a whole, regarding the changes in infrastructure and aims for commissioning as a concept: the majority believe it won't provide better services at all. Many of the GPs we spoke to believe commissioning will destroy the NHS – and only one in ten expressed a view that commissioning would give them better opportunities to get the best service for their patients. In fact our study showed that a third (33%) of GPs think that it's a bold reform but they do not feel equipped to deliver it. Without the appropriate training clinical commissioning could fall short of its goals and attract on-going scepticism.

Whether these perceptions will become a reality is yet to be seen. However, what's clear is that if the initiative is to work in the way in which it is intended – to help reduce costs while improving patient choice and care – the Government must learn lessons from the introduction of the Fit Note and give GPs more appropriate support to help them achieve their aims.

“The patient's experience of the health service would greatly improve if there is a change in patient expectations and beliefs that health is someone else's responsibility.”

Quote from one GP questioned for Aviva's 2011 Health of the Nation index.

Methodology

Aviva commissioned extensive research among a panel of 208 GPs across the UK. The sample is broadly representative of the UK across age, gender, region, practice size (by patient numbers and number of GP's working in practice) and how long the GP has been practicing.

GPs were interviewed between May 9th and 11th 2011. The research was conducted online on behalf of Aviva by independent research company Pollab.

According to the General Medical Council, there were 50,720 UK registered GP's in May 2011.

About Aviva UK Health

Aviva UK Health is one of the largest providers of private medical insurance, income protection, occupational health and group risk products and services. Our 2.9m customers range from individuals taking our personal policies through to multinational corporations covering 1000's of employees.

We were recently voted Health Insurance Company of the Year at the 2010 Health Insurance awards. We also won the Best Group Private Medical Insurance Provider and Best Occupational Health Provider categories.

Our customers are at the heart of everything we do. Whether it be offering expert personal support through our dedicated claims teams that are specially trained to deal with sensitive issues such as cancer, women's health problems and mental health issues, providing the most appropriate treatment for musculoskeletal injuries through our Back-Up service, or aiding customers' rehabilitation and return to work through our income protection and occupational health expertise.

Recognising that absence is a key issue for companies, we work in partnership with our corporate customers to tailor appropriate benefit solutions that help them understand and address their absence management issues.

However, our business isn't just about treating customers when they are unwell. We're also committed to keeping our customers healthy. As such, many of our policies include benefits such as discounted gym memberships and MyHealthCounts, our online health management portal that helps customers stay healthy and rewards them with a discount off their renewal premium if they demonstrate good health.