

Political parties fail to impress voters on promises to maintain NHS funding

British Journal of Healthcare Computing & Information Management. 27
November 2009



Neither the government nor the opposition have fared well on their promises for the NHS in an e-survey of delegates at the NHS Alliance's annual conference last month.

The majority (86%) of respondents, including GPs, nurses and primary care managers, were 'concerned', 'cautious' or 'suspicious' about health secretary Andy Burnham's promise to do all he could to protect primary care budgets from public sector spending cuts.

And despite the Conservatives' commitment to 'slash' NHS bureaucracy, only 26% of those questioned believed the return of a Tory government at the next election would improve the quality of patient care.

In4Health, the national communication channel for patients in GPs' surgeries and hospitals, carried out the survey of 100 delegates at the Alliance conference in October. In4Health staff used handheld technology to collect answers to a questionnaire on hot topics at the conference.

Delegates were doubtful too about the government's new initiative to encourage patients to leave feedback about their GPs on the NHS Choices website. Nearly half (48%) thought this would not give an accurate picture of the quality of their GP's care. Only 19% thought it would give an accurate picture, while 33% were undecided.

The survey also revealed that health professionals feel taken for granted in their jobs, and also their views of the health service as patients.

A number admitted in the anonymous survey that they sometimes forget to keep appointments at their own GP's surgery or local hospital — despite knowing the cost to the NHS of not turning up.

More than 3 out of 10 (38%) confessed to missing up to five medical appointments with their GP or local hospital, costing the NHS around £100 a time.

A third (33%) of respondents confessed to missing one appointment while 5% revealed they'd missed up to five booked appointments. The NHS Information Centre estimates that DNAs (did not attend) appointments at hospitals cost the NHS in the region of £600 million a year.

The majority of GPs, nurses and health service workers did not feel valued by patients, their primary care trust and the Department of Health or government.

Sixty-six percent felt unappreciated by patients, 70% said their employers did not value them and 78% said the same of the government.

Speaking as patients, 59% of health professionals rated expert diagnosis and advice coupled with efficient, swift treatment as the most important factors in their healthcare experience. Only 13% rated cleanliness and hygiene as the most important factors. And just 3% saw choice — the ability to be seen and treated by the health professional they wanted — as the most important.

With waiting areas the first impression many people have of the NHS, the survey revealed frustration among health professionals who were eager to de-clutter and overhaul public areas and make them more welcoming. According to 57% of respondents, GP and hospital waiting areas were over-filled with leaflets and posters, and mismatched seating. In short, they 'could do better'.

Louise Ford, Programme Director at In4Health commented: "The survey gives a fascinating snapshot of the views of health professionals on a range of vital issues, both professionally and as patients using health services. For instance, it reveals that they are prone to forgetfulness like the rest of us, and occasionally miss NHS appointments, despite knowing the high cost of these.

"It's worth noting that the majority of respondents would like to see an improvement in public waiting areas with more modern facilities, including up-to-date and relevant information displayed for patients.

"Another interesting finding is that the most important factor in their healthcare experience as patients is efficient, expert diagnosis and advice — which of course is what they and colleagues strive to provide every single working day."

In4Health used a Samsung Q1 Ultra Handheld PC for the NHS Alliance survey — a new addition to In4Health's service offer. Ford added: "It is already proving extremely popular with patients and professionals, who find it convenient, portable and easy to use. GPs and primary care staff particularly like being able to reach patients out in the community and the facility to view real-time information from patient feedback. "