

Choice in the Birmingham and the Black Country SHA: Summary Paper

Introduction

The choice agenda, in effect from December 2005, dictates that patients will be offered choice of public and private providers at the point of referral by the GP. This choice will be initially 4 or 5 providers, but from April 2006, choice will widen with the introduction of the Extended Choice Network (ECN). By 2008 free choice is promised.

This report summarises the findings of a research study conducted by the MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of the Birmingham and the Black Country Strategic Health Authority (BBC SHA) into what influences patient and GP choice of hospital at referral.

The research objectives were:

- Awareness of choice policy
- Awareness and reputation of local hospitals
- Preference of provider including independent sector
- View on options for a treatment centre / ISTC in the centre of Birmingham
- Usage of and trust in information sources
- Links with demographic information.

Methodology

The findings presented in the report were taken from two pieces of work carried out by MORI on behalf of the BBC SHA (April – June 2005):

- A). Quantitative research among the local public including over 1000 telephone interviews with respondents of 6 local authorities.¹
- B). Quantitative research among GPs including 100 telephone interviews with GPs in 6 local authorities.
- **Weighting:** the quantitative data collected during telephone interviews with the local public and GPs in the BBC SHA was not weighted – it should be noted that due to the population distribution in the BBC area the Birmingham Local Authority is significantly larger than any other local authority area.
- **Caveats:** it is important to note that certain compromises were made in order to achieve a manageable questionnaire. These included exclusion of the 3 specialist Trusts. Organisations were either referred to by Trust name or hospital name and for each local authority area the choice was limited to 5 organisations. In some areas this resulted in offering at least one more distant provider.
- **Previous Research for the BBC SHA:** In September 2003, MORI Social Research Institute conducted research on behalf of BBC SHA – this reviewed patients, GPs and consultants views on choice.

The main findings were:

- 8% of public in 2003 knew about choice.

¹ A). Quantitative research among local public: quotas were set by local authority to ensure 200 interviews were achieved in every local authority to match the age profile of respondents who have undergone elective surgery in BBC SHA facilities in 2004. B). Quantitative research among GPs: quotas were set to ensure at least 10 interviews in each of the 6 local authorities included in the survey

- Choice was not seen as greatest priority for NHS but public were positive about principles behind it.
- Concerns raised around practical introduction of choice.
- Key areas of choice identified: choice of hospital, choice of consultant, GP appointment date / time.
- Marked differences were noted by age, class and ethnicity.
- In 2003 5% of patients were not prepared to travel further than their local hospital.
- 15% felt comfortable making choices about which hospital to use on their own.
- As many as one third of GPs and Consultants thought choice would have a negative effect on the NHS (due to bureaucracy; effectiveness of mechanisms).
- Became clear that effective communication with practitioners and public prior to implementation was essential.

Key Findings from the 2005 research

Local awareness of choice: most respondents are not aware of the choice initiative in the NHS. (12% say they know a great deal or a fair amount, lower in BBC SHA than in GB overall). However, compared to the MORI research in 2003 awareness has increased (from 27% to 37%).

The Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population are significantly more likely to know a great deal about choice (9%) than the white population (4%). There is also a difference according to social grade: ABC1s are more likely to know a great deal (6%) than C2DES (3%).

Awareness and favourability rating of local providers

To understand how the BBC SHA patients will behave when choice is introduced, respondents were presented with a list of five hospitals, one of which was private.

Respondents answered questions about their local providers:

- Their familiarity with each hospital in their area
- They were asked to rate how favourable they felt towards each hospital
- Respondents were presented with two scenarios (referral for outpatient visit and referral for inpatient treatment) and asked to choose one of the five hospitals to have their treatment.²

Research highlighted that 'the Birmingham University NHST' is relatively unknown, despite being the best-rated hospital – however locally the hospitals are referred to as 'Selly Oak' and 'Queen Elizabeth'. This highlights the importance of the name that is used when choice is offered.

When presented with a list of 5 hospitals most respondents claimed to know little or nothing about the private hospital (between 14% and 57% claim never to have heard of them). Awareness of NHS hospitals varies greatly.

Despite low awareness many rate the private hospital more favourable than the NHS hospitals. Respondents said that private hospitals in general are better at providing more environment-related, clinical and other aspects of care than NHS hospitals.

² Respondents generally rate highly the hospitals about which they know most. However given private hospitals' low familiarity ratings compared to NHS hospitals, respondents tended to rate private hospitals more favourably than expected – suggesting there are assumptions or beliefs about the private sector.

Most respondents chose an NHS hospital when asked where they would prefer to have a treatment carried out, but 28% chose a private hospital when the treatment was for a minor operation and 30% chose it for a major operation. When looking at ranking order, private hospitals became the second most popular choice. The reasons cited for the choice of hospital depend on whether respondents chose the NHS or private hospital. For those who chose an NHS hospital, proximity was the most important factor – for those who chose a private sector hospital they cited perceived or assumed higher standards and quality of care.

Choosing the right communication channels

Hospital reputation will be crucial for patients choosing a hospital under Choose and Book. Using available channels will assist in influencing choices (GPs, local press, friends and family, TV, leaflets, radio, internet, national media)

Where do respondents get most of their information about local hospitals?
(and which sources would they most trust to find out about local hospitals?)
(*where – trust*)

- GP (26%) – 47% Trust
- Friends / Family (26%) – 26% Trust
- People who work in the NHS (12%) – 10% Trust
- Local press (29%) – 9% Trust
- Local TV (12%) – 5% Trust

Choice of provider and reasons behind the choice

When presented with four NHS hospitals and one private sector hospital to choose from, most people choose the NHS as their preferred provider of minor or major medical treatment.

- 72% chose one of the NHS hospitals for a minor operation. (Therefore 28% would choose a private hospital for a minor operation).
- 70% chose one of the NHS hospitals for a major operation. (Therefore 30% indicate that if they require a major medical procedure they would rather choose a private sector hospital)

The well-known and highly-rated local NHS hospitals remain top choice in most areas. However private hospitals are generally the second most popular choice.

The role and potential influence of GP is highlighted. Half of respondents state that GPs are their most trusted source of information about hospitals and more than half GPs say they want to play an active role in helping patients make their choice, either by providing advice or suggesting a hospital patients may want to choose. GPs referral patterns may also be included. The key reasons that may make them change their referral pattern are:

- Evidence of 24-hour back up to manage cases that have complications³
- Guarantee of discharge communication within 24 hours⁴
- Assurance full treatment package is provided⁵

Alternative Providers

The BBC SHA is particularly interested in respondents' attitudes towards the private sector's involvement in the NHS, as the SHA is looking at options for increased Independent Sector

³ 97% consider this very or fairly important

⁴ 95%

⁵ 94%

provision in response to Government policy. 70% of those surveyed support the proposals for a privately run treatment centre – however 3% would not be likely to use it.

Respondents were asked what factors would make them more likely to use an alternative healthcare service provider. The following 4 aspects of care have the biggest impact:

- If the centre was MRSA free⁶
- If it was recommended by your GP⁷
- Shorter waiting times⁸
- Free door to door transport⁹

GPs attitudes towards choice compared to the local public are less positive:

- Just over half (52%) say they are happy for the NHS to pay for patients to have their treatment in private care.¹⁰
- In addition there is less support for a new treatment centre in Birmingham centre among GPs than the local public.¹¹
- 59% say they would recommend the centre to their patients and 33% say they would not recommend it

Other reasons for choice

Respondents focus on quality of care as opposed to convenience when choosing a private hospital for their treatment is further underlined by the fact that most say they are prepared to travel, at least to some extent, for their treatment.

- 54% of respondents say that they are prepared to travel within their local authority or at least within 20 miles
- More than 10% say that they would travel to a private hospital as far as 100 miles
- 8% say they would not travel further than their local NHS hospital

GP attitudes to choice

GPs are the first point of contact for most patients and they will be crucial to making choice for patients happen. Referral patterns reflect GPs direct experience and preferences as well as feedback they receive from patients.

- 56% of GPs say they expect to either offer advice on or suggest to patients which hospital they may want to chose
- However 31% expect someone else (e.g. Practice employees, PCT or Booking Management System) to talk patients through their options.¹²

GPs perception of their role in advising patients regarding choice fit in relatively well with the 2003 results on local population's preferred ways of receiving information on choice:

- Most people would like to talk face to face with a specialist
- Around 1 in 5 would welcome printed information in the post

⁶ 52% of those unlikely to use the potential centre said they would be more likely to use it if the centre was MRSA free

⁷ 49% of those unlikely to use the centre said they would be more likely to use it on that assumption

⁸ 44% would be more likely to use the centre on this provision

⁹ 40% would be much more likely to use the centre on this provision

¹⁰ 29% do not have a preference + 17% would be unhappy

¹¹ 40% support and 33% oppose

¹² 1 in 10 are unsure how they will behave when Choose ad Book is implemented in their practice

Perceptions of superiority of providers

Both the local public and GPs tend to perceive the private sector as superior to the NHS in providing many aspects of care. However GPs tend to give the NHS more credit than the public respondents, regarding crucial aspects of clinical care:

- Respondents felt that the private sector is better at providing most aspects¹³ of care in particular dealing with MRSA
- There are only two aspects where the NHS is seen as a better provider – ability to respond to religious or other personal needs and beliefs and its ability to deal with operations that go wrong
- The private sector is slightly ahead of the NHS in respondents minds regarding the quality of medical and nursing care (plus access to more modern equipment).

Experience of private healthcare affects respondents perceptions

Those who have personally had a private medical treatment are more likely to think the private sector is better than the NHS at most of the aspects of care tested relating to hospital environment, medical care of staff practices.

GPs see the private sector as superior on environment-related factors.

Attitudes towards private sector's involvement in the NHS

Overall attitudes are slightly more positive from respondents from local communities than among GPs.¹⁴

Tipping points of choice

Respondents would be more likely to use local NHS hospital if:

- It was MRSA free (73%)
- Waiting times were shorter (69%)
- It was recommended by your GP (68%)
- It provided free door to door transport (57%)
- It offered flexible appointment times (55%)
- It guarantees car parking facilities (51%)
- It was recommended by your friends and family (49%)
- It offered private room for those who want it (48%)

Executive Summary

Overall the findings are positive towards the idea of exercising more choice in the health service. Awareness of the patient choice agenda is low, however respondents show a willingness to make choices. In addition, attitudes in the BBC SHA area are generally positive towards the involvement of private hospitals.¹⁵

¹³ Access to private room, nice environment, quality of food, flexibility about visiting, MRSA rates, modern equipment, quality of nursing and medical care, ability to deal with operations that go wrong, well-managed centre, evening and weekend treatments, dignity and respect, quality of information, ability to respond to religious or other personal needs and beliefs.

¹⁴ 55% of respondents are very happy if the NHS paid for treatment in the private sector; 16% fairly happy; 16% no preference. However 30% of GPs are fairly happy; 29% no preference, 22% very happy.

¹⁵ 71% of respondents are happy for the NHS to pay for patients to have their treatment in private hospitals. 11% unhappy.

