

Emergency Care in England

Summary Report

March 2004

Prepared for

The National Audit Office

Introduction

In March 2003, the National Audit Office (NAO) commissioned Ipsos-UK to conduct research into their “Emergency care in England” study.

The omnibus section of their research is part of a much larger and wider-scale research project. Over a nine month period, the NAO will look at all aspects of emergency care including A & E, ambulance trusts, NHS Direct, walk-in-centres and the integration between providers. Research will also be undertaken on patient attitudes and on the progress achieved by regional emergency care networks along with reviewing existing research.

This report provides a summary of the main findings generated from a sample of 1,623 adults aged 15+ on the topical subject of Emergency Care in England.

Research Methodologies and Sample

Interviews were conducted among the general population aged 15+ in England. Interviewing took place between the 26th March and 1st April 2004. In total, 1623 interviews were conducted in order to gather information for this particular study. This sample was then weighted to 1612 adults in order to reapportion the population within sex, age, social grade and working status to achieve a balanced and representative sample. The sample profile broke down as follows:

Classification Information		National Profile: Total sample N=1612 (weighted)
SEX	Male	48%
	Female	52%
AGE	15 to 24	16%
	25 to 34	17%
	35 to 44	19%
	45 to 54	15%
	55 to 64	13%
	65+	20%
SOCIAL GRADE	AB	26%
	C1	29%
	C2	21%
	DE	25%

Interviews were conducted using IPSOS-UK's in-home, face-to-face omnibus service CAPIBUS. CAPIBUS uses CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) and delivers a nationally and regionally representative sample of 2,000 adults aged 15 years or over every week of the year.

MAIN FINDINGS

Q1: How many of the following services have you heard of?

Just over half (56%) of adults in England have needed to seek health care or advice (for either themselves or another person) over the last year.

Respondents were prompted with a list of services and asked which they have heard of. The top response was GP (96%), followed by 999 Ambulance (93%) Accident and Emergency (93%), Doctor on Call (84%), General Practice Nurse (83%) and NHS Direct (80%).

Awareness remained consistent across the various demographic profiles and only 1% of people claimed to be unaware of any of these services.

Q2a: Are you registered with a GP?

Almost all respondents interviewed (97%) were registered with a GP.

There was little if any difference across the demographics. One notable finding occurs within the Ethnic split. 98% of those classified as white were registered with a GP, compared to only 93% of those classified as non-white.

Q2b: Have you tried to register with a GP?

As most respondents were registered with a GP, few actually went through to this question. Only a fifth of those who have not registered with a GP, have tried to do so. Although there were no significant demographic differences, given that only 3% of the sample were not registered, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions in any case.

Q3: How recently have you had a need to seek urgent health care or advice for either yourself or another person you were taking care of?

On average, people seek health care/advice every two months. Around a quarter (23%) of people have sought advice within the last month, although just over half have not sought advice for a year or more.

Looking at the last month only, unsurprisingly, parents with children aged 0-5 years old (34%) were more likely to seek health care/advice than those who do not have any children under the age of 15 (21%). Those in part time work (31%) or who are unemployed (27%) were also more likely to seek healthcare/advice than those in full time work (20%) or self-employed (19%).

Q4: How often in the past year have you sought health care or advice for either yourself or another person you were taking care of?

Respondents who stated they have sought advice/healthcare over the last twelve months, have done so an average of 3.27 occasions. Those in the 25-34 age group (3.76) were far more likely to seek advice/healthcare than any other age group. People with children aged 0-5 (3.68 times per year) were also more likely to seek healthcare than those without children under 15 years of age (3.09). Many of those with children aged 0-5 fell in the 25-34 year old age group.

Q5: Who was the healthcare and advice required for?

Just under two thirds of respondents (57%) required healthcare and advice for themselves. Looking at this by age profile, 36% of the 35-44 and 30% of the 25-34 year old age groups needed healthcare and advice for a child, compared with 71% of the elderly population (65+ years) who needed the care/advice for themselves..

Q6: What time of day did you seek this care?

The majority of care was sought during office hours. 70% of advice was sought between Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm (the working week). Generally the self employed cannot afford time off during the working day and so do not take as much time during this period to seek care, hence 45% of self employed people sought care during the working week, compared with 78% of retired people and 71% of unemployed people.

Q7: Was the nature of the problem an illness or an injury?

Just over three quarters (76%) of people required advice/healthcare for an illness, with only 24% for injury. The age break in itself tells a story. The older generation ie. people aged 65+ (85%) were far more likely to seek advice healthcare for an illness, whereas people aged 15-24 were far more likely to seek advice/healthcare for an injury.

Q8: What kind of illness was this?

People who mentioned they had an illness (Question 7) were then asked what type of illness it was. 58% had a 'new illness', 29% had an 'existing illness' and only 12% had a 'long term illness'. Those in employment (68% Full time, 66% part time) were more likely to have a new illness than others.

Q9: Thinking about your most recent trip, how soon after you became aware of the problem did you first seek medical help/advice?

Length of time	Injury	Illness
Immediately	51%	41%
Less than 2 hours	16%	12%
2-12 hours	11%	11%
13-24 hours	3%	8%
More than 24 hours	20%	28%

Over half (51%) of the respondents who suffered from an injury sought medical help/advice immediately, compared with 41% of those who had an illness. Just over three fifths of those in social grade C2DE (62%) sought medical help/advice immediately after picking up an injury (compared with only 43% of ABC1s). Looking at illnesses, it is clear that people are less likely to seek immediate help for an illness than for an injury, with only 38% and 44% of ABC1s and C2DEs respectively, responding immediately.

Q10a: On deciding that medical help or advice was needed, what did you do first?

Just over two thirds of people interviewed (68%) sought help via telephone, with 27% going for help in person without telephoning first.

Using the telephone was particularly popular with older age groups, with 74% of the 55+ age group choosing this as their preferred method, compared with only 59% of 15-24 year olds.

Q10b: Who did you call for healthcare or advice?

This question was asked of all who sought help via the telephone.

72% of people called their local GP, with 8% calling an ambulance and 7% an A & E department. Unemployed people (92%) were far more likely to call their local GP than anyone else.

Q10c: Where on the Internet did you look for healthcare or advice?

Less than 1% of the total sample used the Internet as a means of contacting someone, hence we cannot report anything significant from the findings.

Q10d: Where did you go in person for healthcare or advice?

Overall, 52% of people went to see their local GP, whereas just over a third went to A & E. In the main, C2, D and E social groups were more likely to go to see their local GPs than AB's, who would rather go to A & E. GPs were open during working hours, and this could explain why only 48% of people in full time employment went in person to their local GP.

Q11: Which factors were important when choosing the service you contacted first?

The following table summarises what respondents believe to be important when choosing a service:

Factor	Mean Rating (out of 5)
You thought you would get the best quality of care	4.49
You thought it was the most appropriate type of medical help/advice	4.45
Speed of being served	4.44
You thought the people providing the service were the best qualified to do so	4.41
Service had suitable opening times	4.40
Location of the service	4.29
Familiar with the service/people	4.19
Prior experiences with that service	4.10
Previous advice from a healthcare professional	4.01
Prior experiences with other services	3.81
Quality of non-medical facilities	3.57
Publicity	2.66
Media	2.44

Looking at the mean ratings (average), it is clear that the areas that had most importance in influencing the service contacted first were quality of care (4.49), 'most appropriate type of medical help/advice' (4.45) and speed of service (4.44). Areas that were seen as least important were the media (2.44) and publicity/advertising campaigns (2.66). Other areas of note were 'most qualified to deal with the problem' (4.41) and 'suitable opening times' (4.40).

Q12a: After this first action, did you do anything else to seek help or advice?

Almost three quarters of those registered with a GP (73%) did not do anything else to seek help/advice. People who were more likely to seek further help/advice were self employed people (48%) and those with young children in their household (32%). The main reasons for choosing the first service were 'quality of care' , "appropriate type of medical help/advice' and 'speed of service'. This indicates that the majority of people were happy with their first port of call.

Q12b: What action did you take when you sought further help or advice for this problem?

Almost half of respondents who sought further help did so in person (48%). The other main action taken was telephoning for advice (34%). Those in lower social grades (48% E, 40% D), older demographics (46% 65+) and the self employed (44%) were more likely to telephone for advice, whereas parents with young children (59%) were more likely to seek help in person.

Q12c: Why did you take the action that you did?

Two fifths of those who carried out a second action did so because they were instructed to do so as a result of the first consultation they took. One fifth sought further advice as the problem got worse, whilst 19% wanted a second opinion.

Notably, 17% of the self employed were not satisfied with their initial response. They seemed to take a lot of care over their health, mainly due to the ramifications that an enforced layoff would cause.

Q12d: Were you told who to contact for further advice or treatment if necessary?

Over 6 in 10 (62%) were told who to contact for further advice or treatment

Parents of young children (78%) were more likely to be referred for further advice.

Q13: If you were faced with exactly the same situation again, would you follow the same steps?

Overwhelmingly, 84% would follow exactly the same steps again if they found themselves in the same situation again.

Q14: Why would you not follow the same steps again?

Only 16% would not follow the same steps again. When we look at the findings more closely just over a quarter actually confess they would do it the same way again, a paradox in itself. Of the 'never follow the same steps again' group, 12% were not satisfied, 10% said it took too long and 8% would rather go to hospital/A & E. However, it is important to note that all of these base sizes were low.

[PLEASE NOTE: Q15 was set out in a different format from the preceding questions. Q15a was asked to all who would not follow the same steps again (16%). The response they gave at this question, determined the next question they received eg. If they answered 'use the telephone' at Q15a, the respondent was then asked Q15b. This also occurred on Q16 and Q17.]

Q15a: What would be your first step next time you need healthcare/advice?

Just over half (55%) said they would use the telephone as a first point of call if the situation arose again, whereas just under three tenths (29%) would go in person without telephoning first.

Q15b: Who would you call for healthcare or advice this time?

Two fifths (41%) would call their GP, whereas 15% would call the ambulance service and 14% NHS Direct. The bases for the demographics were low. However, 100% of self employed people would call the Ambulance service (base size of 3 responses so evidence can be described as anecdotal at best) and 43% of parents of children would call NHS Direct.

Q15c: Where on the Internet would you look for information for healthcare or advice this time?

Only 5 people would use the Internet to look for information, therefore it is very difficult to make any real assumptions about this method of looking for information.

Q15d: Who would you go to see for healthcare or advice this time?

Again the base was too low to make any real assumptions. However, over half of the people who would go to see someone in person (52%) would go to A & E, whilst 31% would go to see their GP

Q16a: If you or a person you were responsible for, needed to seek urgent health care or advice for a serious or potentially life threatening problem, which of the following would you do?

Three quarters (74%) of adults who have sought healthcare/advice longer than a year ago would telephone for advice or help, whereas 23% would rather go in person for advice or help without telephoning first.

As commented upon earlier, retired people were more likely to telephone for advice (84%). Higher income earners (81% of people earning £25,000 or more) would also telephone for advice or help.

Q16b: Who would you call if you needed to seek urgent Health care or advice for a serious or potentially life threatening problem?

Just over two fifths (43%) of people who would use the telephone first would call the Ambulance service, with 40% calling their local GPs. There were no major demographic differences.

Q16c: Where on the Internet would you look for information?

Only 7 people answered this question, again reinforcing the feeling that the Internet is not the main way to deal with a serious or potentially life-threatening situation.

Q16d: Who would you go to see needed to seek urgent Health care or advice for a serious or potentially life threatening problem?

'My local GP' accounted for half of the responses at this question, with A & E taking care of another 43%. Looking through the demographics, we can see that 91% of part time and 79% of self-employed workers who would go in person without telephoning would go to A & E.

Q17a: If you or a person you were responsible for, needed to seek urgent Health care or advice for a non-life threatening problem, which of the following would you do?

Three quarters (75%) of adults who have sought healthcare/advice longer than a year ago would telephone for advice or help, whereas 20% would rather go in person for advice or help without telephoning first.

Part time (79%) or self employed people (76%) were more likely to telephone for advice. Higher income earners (85% of people earning £25,000 or more) would also telephone for advice or help.

Q17b: Who would you call if you needed to seek urgent health care or advice for a non-life threatening problem?

Over two thirds of people would call their GP (68%) first if a non life-threatening problem arose. Over 65 year olds (77%) were more likely to contact their GP than any other age group, whereas parents of children aged 0-5 were more likely to contact NHS Direct (29%) than any other group.

Q17c: What information from the Internet would you look for?

Although achieving a higher base than the other Internet questions, the base for this question is still very low (17 people) and therefore difficult to make any assumptions with.

Q17d: Who would you go to see if you needed to seek urgent Health care or advice for a non-life threatening problem?

Seven tenths of people who would go in person to see someone without telephoning would see their GP, with just under a quarter (23%) of people going to A & E. Older respondents were more likely to go to see their GP than any other age group (83%), as were parents of children aged 0-9. More self-employed (44%) would rather go to and A & E department than any other working status group.

Q18: Which of the following do you think were acceptable scenarios if you call 999 and ask for an ambulance?

This question saw the full sample restored, and the following results produced:

Scenario	Percentage
The ambulance comes and takes you to Accident and Emergency no matter what	58%
The ambulance personnel arrive and treat you themselves and do not take you to hospital unless required	40%
The 999 telephone operator connects you to another service if your condition is non-life threatening (such as a GP service or NHS direct)	30%
The ambulance personnel assess you and call for someone else to come and treat you in your home	29%
A GP or other medical professional comes instead of the ambulance	26%
The ambulance service decides your problem is not serious enough to send a vehicle, and gives you advice including to visit your GP or to contact another service, such as NHS Direct	24%
The ambulance takes you to another type of medical care provider that is not a hospital (such as a GP surgery or minor injuries unit)	21%
The ambulance takes you to another area of the hospital	19%

As seen in the table above, just under two thirds of people believed that “the ambulance comes and takes you to an A&E no matter what” is the most acceptable scenario. Social grade A respondents find all of the scenarios acceptable, whilst, in comparison, Social grade E do not appear to find many of the scenarios as acceptable as other social grades.

Q19: In the event that you attended an accident and emergency department, and the person who assessed you felt that you should see your GP instead, which of the following would be acceptable to you?

55% of people believe that they should go and see a GP that is not their own, whereas 41% feel they should consult a doctor in the next few days, with only 30% wanting to see their own GP

Self-employed people are far more likely to see a GP (not their own) in A & E (75%)

General Conclusions

An overwhelming majority of people are registered with a GP

On average, people seek emergency help every 2 months, with parents of children aged 0-5 being the most likely to do so.

Generally speaking, the self-employed cannot afford time off during the working day to go to see their GP, and so wherever possible seek alternative help eg. Out of office hours.

Most people seek help or advice via the telephone. The Internet, although booming in many areas, has not as yet grown as a first port of call, in terms of emergency situations

The majority of the older generation use the telephone in emergency situations

The majority of people who have had to seek medical advice/ help would follow exactly the same steps again if a problem arose in the future, thus showing their satisfaction with the system as it stands.