

## RESEARCH NEWS

# Quarter of hospital emergency visits are due to inability to get appointments, study finds

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Nearly six million attendances at hospital emergency departments in England occur each year because patients cannot get a GP appointment, new research has found. Researchers at Imperial College London said that the figure represented 26.5% of unplanned emergency department attendances.

They said that, although a significant number of emergency attendances in England each year could be linked to patients' access to general practice, it did not necessarily follow that improving this access would reduce emergency department attendances, adding that more research was needed. The analysis was funded by the National Institute for Health Research and published on 30 June in the *British Journal of General Practice*.<sup>1</sup>

The lead researcher was Thomas E Cowling, the institute's doctoral research fellow at Imperial College, who said that the study was conducted because little numerical evidence had so far backed claims that a lack of access to GPs could be a factor in rising emergency hospital attendances.

The researchers estimated that 345.6 million GP consultations took place during the financial year 2012-13, on the basis of estimates from previous years and the trend for this figure to increase over time. They then used patients' own accounts of their latest attempts to see or speak to a GP or nurse as detailed in the GP Patient Survey 2012-13, to calculate the ratio of these attempts that resulted in emergency department attendance to attempts that resulted in a GP consultation.

The study showed that, for every 100 attempts that resulted in a GP consultation, 1.67 attempts resulted in a visit to the emergency department. The researchers said that, although this ratio was small, in absolute terms it gave a figure of 5.77 million emergency hospital attendances that were preceded by an inability to get a suitable appointment (multiplying by the 345.6 million GP consultations that had occurred in 2012-13). The 5.77 million figure equated to 26.5% of the unplanned

emergency department attendances in that year, the analysis said.

Azeem Majeed, a professor at Imperial College's school of public health, said that people should not automatically assume that improving access to general practice would solve the problem. "The picture is fundamentally much more complicated than that. Firstly, it may be that the same patients would still go to A&E [accident and emergency] even if they did get better access to GPs," he said. "Secondly, if improving GP access does help, there is a need for more research to find out the best way to approach this. Thirdly, it is not currently clear if increasing numbers of A&E attendances do actually lessen performance in terms of increasing waiting times."

The researchers acknowledged some uncertainty in the estimates and said that a more detailed picture could emerge from surveying a nationally representative sample of patients attending emergency departments. They recommended an in-depth analysis of pilot schemes that offer appointments outside current opening hours.



1 Cowling T, Harris M, Watt H, Gibbons D, Majeed M. Access to general practice and visits to accident and emergency (A&E) departments in England: cross sectional analysis of national patient survey. *Br J Gen Pract* 2014;434-9:10.3399/bjgp14X680533.

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