



# Two thirds of patients in general practice don't need to see a doctor, report says

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Only a third of people in England who go to a general practice should be seen by a doctor, says a report published by the public services think tank Reform.<sup>1</sup>

GPs currently take around two thirds of the 372 million appointments at GP surgeries every year, but GPs and other experts interviewed for the research said that around half of these appointments could be taken by nurses and other clinicians.

Reform has recommended that the UK government abandon its target to recruit an additional 5000 GPs by 2020, because it “is an inefficient allocation of NHS resource.”

It explained that the composition of the clinical workforce had shifted towards more GPs in recent years, with the number of GPs increasing between 2004 and 2014 at a faster rate (by 15%) than the number of practice nurses (by 11%). The report estimated that if nurses took the 57 million appointments for minor ailments the NHS in England would save over £700m (£870m; \$990m) a year. This change would ease GPs' workloads and enable them to offer longer appointments, up to 20 minutes, for the patients in greatest need, the report said.

Alex Hitchcock, a coauthor of the report, said, “Employing 5000 more GPs is nothing more than a sticking plaster for an out of date model. Bigger practices and new technology can deliver better access and stop millions of unnecessary A&E [hospital accident and emergency department] visits.”

The average general practice covers only 7500 people, but super-practices covering hundreds of thousands of people would be more efficient and improve the care of patients, the report said.

The Care Quality Commission has said that the quality of GPs' care increases in line with the size of practices and that bigger practices could deliver a wider range of services, easing pressure on the rest of the NHS. For example, an urgent care centre set up by the super-practice Lakeside in Northamptonshire delivers appointments at less than a third of the price of an equivalent emergency department visit, and applying this model across England could save the NHS £1.1bn a year, the report's authors estimated. Lakeside's approach has also reduced overnight stays in local emergency departments by up to 50%.

At present only 7% of GP appointments are booked online, and GPs could make much more use of video consultations, triage, and e-consultation, through which patients could submit

questions and get self care advice. The report estimated that around a fifth of patients would decide not to seek a GP appointment if they were able to get to better online information.

The report also rejected the idea that there was little demand among patients for a seven day GP service. It included new data from a consortium of general practices in Herefordshire that has been offering weekend appointments for over a year, showing that demand for them has been steadily rising. In January 2015 only 40% of weekend appointments were filled, but by December 2015 80% were taken up.

Seven day services would also relieve pressure on the rest of the NHS and reduce costs, the report said. Each year 12 million emergency department visits and out-of-hours GP appointments resulted from patients' inability to see a GP, which wastes £870m each year, the report said, given that the cost of a GP appointment is £21 whereas an out-of-hours appointment costs £68 and an emergency department visit costs £124.

Maureen Baker, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said, “Many of the recommendations in today's report cannot be done in most practices with the time and resources available.”

She said that surgeries were struggling to recruit practice nurses and that general practices were already offering different types of appointments, such as phone consultations, but she added, “Demand is rising so acutely that this is having little effect in terms our workload.” She said, “The college does recognise that there is huge potential in using technology to support patients and the health professionals who provide their care—but moving ideas from the drawing board to reality will be unachievable without investment in general practice.”

Baker added that the report's support for seven day services in general practice “flies in the face of our own research—and the fact that a number of surgeries that have piloted seven day working have had to scale down services due to a lack of patient demand at weekends.”

1 Ewbank L, Hitchcock A, Sasse T. Who cares? The future of general practice. Reform, Apr 2016. [www.reform.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Reform\\_who\\_cares\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_general\\_practice.pdf](http://www.reform.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Reform_who_cares_the_future_of_general_practice.pdf).