

Survey to find out how accurately NHS Choices reflects the availability of dental providers in Derbyshire

Purpose:

To compare the information held about dental providers on the NHS Choices website with the information given when enquiries are made over the telephone.

Background:

Healthwatch Derbyshire is aware of an apparent difficulty securing an NHS dentist in the county. This is because we receive telephone calls from the public who have been signposted to us to help them register with a dentist for NHS treatment. These people regularly report difficulty registering with a dentist in their local area, especially when they need treatment quickly. This seems particularly true of the Chesterfield and High Peak areas.

Healthwatch Derbyshire receives information monthly from NHS England about which dental providers are accepting new patients. This information does not always correlate with the information held on NHS Choices, which is the source of online information that a patient would likely use when looking to register with a dentist.

To test this, during a Google search for 'find NHS dentist in Derbyshire' the first search result is for NHS Choices: <http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Dentists/LocationSearch/3>. In fact, the top seven results are all links to different parts of the NHS Choices website. For patients to locate and register with a dentist for NHS treatment, it would seem imperative that the information on the NHS Choices website is accurate and up to date.

A Healthwatch Derbyshire volunteer researcher has also explored the background to this issue, and has found additional information about this problem. In June 2015, research by Which? revealed that a third (31%) of NHS dentists who say they are accepting new patients on the government's NHS Choices are actually not, and those that are accepting new patients often have long waiting times.

<http://www.which.co.uk/news/2015/06/nhs-dentist-access-real-choice-is-out-of-reach-405973/>

Researchers called 500 dental surgeries who state on the government's official website, NHS Choices, that they are accepting new NHS patients to see if they could book an appointment. Three in 10 practices turned down researchers because they didn't have availability. Of those that did offer an appointment, 29% could not see a patient within two weeks.

The Which? research showed that only seven out of 14 dentists on NHS Choices in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire that claimed to have NHS appointments actually provided them. This was classified as 'Bad Availability'.

Healthwatch Derbyshire survey:

To establish the extent of this issue, Healthwatch Derbyshire elected to undertake a telephone survey using a volunteer to ask a series of questions on Wednesday 6th January, 2016. The responses to the questions were recorded on a spreadsheet.

On the day of the exercise, information was printed from the NHS Choices website for dental providers in Chesterfield and up to a maximum of six miles away from the town. The reason that six miles was selected as a reasonable distance from the town is that any more than six miles from

Chesterfield, and the search results tended to be to dental providers with Sheffield addresses, and not Chesterfield. This would therefore seem a likely point for a Chesterfield resident to end their search. This search area included 25 dental providers.

During the outgoing call, the volunteer explained to the operator that they were calling from Healthwatch Derbyshire to check if the practice is:

1. Currently accepting new NHS adult patients who pay for their care
2. Currently accepting new NHS adult patients who are exempt from paying for their care
3. Currently accepting new NHS patients aged between 0-18 years
4. If yes to any of the above - when is the next available appointment

The information held by NHS Choices was then compared to the information given during the telephone survey. The findings are contained in the following summary.

Findings:

A total of 25 dental providers were identified, and attempts were made to contact all. The volunteer was unable to make contact with three practices as the surgery was closed at the time that the calls were made (a Wednesday afternoon). These practices are highlighted on the results sheet in red. One practice was an orthodontist and so was removed from the sample.

NHS ADULT FEE PAYING PATIENTS

Of the 21 dental practices remaining, there was a deviation from the information held on NHS Choices for five of the 21 practices (24%) in the case of accepting adult NHS fee paying patients. In all five cases, NHS Choices indicated that they were taking on NHS adults, but this proved not to be the case. Seven out of the 21 dental providers (33%) were taking on NHS fee paying adults.

NHS NON FEE PAYING ADULTS

Of the 21 dental practices remaining, there was a deviation from the information held on NHS Choices for five of the 21 practices (24%) in the case of accepting non fee paying adults. All of these practices were not taking on fee exempt adults, but NHS Choices indicated that they were. Seven out of 21 dental providers (33%) were taking on NHS fee exempt adults.

CHILDREN AGED 0-18

Of the 21 dental practices remaining, there was a deviation from the information held on NHS Choices for six of the 21 practices (29%) in the case of accepting children aged 0-18. All six practices were not accepting children but NHS Choices indicated that they were. In terms of availability, eight out of 21 dental providers (38%) were taking on children on an NHS basis.

WAITING TIMES

There was a wide variation in terms of waiting times. Using the example of an NHS fee paying adult making a call on the same day as our exercise took place, out of the seven practices with an open list:

- One said they could book patients within the next two to four days.
- One said they could book patients for the following week.
- Three said the wait would be approximately two weeks.
- Two said the wait would be approximately four weeks.

One additional practice advised that they were not taking on routine NHS patients but they would see patients with 'high needs' who had not seen a dentist for at least two years and required treatment in an emergency.

Summary of Findings:

For all types of dental patients in the Chesterfield area, there is some availability of NHS dentists. The information held on NHS Choices, however, is not accurate, with five out of 21 practices (24%) contacted regarding fee paying NHS adults providing different information to that held on NHS Choices. In all five cases, NHS Choices indicated that practices were taking on patients, when this was not the case. This means that NHS Choices presents an overly optimistic picture of availability.

This makes it difficult and time consuming for patients to navigate NHS Choices meaningfully to find a dental provider.

In real terms, this would mean that a patient needing dental care with some urgency in Chesterfield who uses NHS Choices as a search tool would be presented with 25 providers. Seven of these 25 providers (28%) would be able to see an NHS fee paying adult. One of these providers could see a patient within a few days, with one additional provider being able to see patients with specific high needs. The remaining six practices would be able to offer an appointment but, at best case, not until the following week.