

# **Research on experience and attitudes in relation to NHS Complaints**

March 2007

## ***Summary***

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) and the Scottish Health Council (SHC) jointly commissioned research to establish the views and experiences of:

- those who have made a complaint to the NHS in Scotland since the introduction of the revised complaints procedure effective from April 2005
- those who have been dissatisfied with health services but who have chosen not to complain.

## ***The Research Brief***

The following key research questions were identified:

- What aspects of the new procedure work well in terms of being understood and effective from a complainant perspective?
- What aspects are less effective, poorly understood and create barriers, frustration or confusion for the complainant?
- Why do some people start the complaint process but do not follow through to resolution?
- Why do some people who are unhappy with the service they receive decide not to complain?
- As a pilot study what lessons can be learned for future research involving complainants and those who do not complain.

## ***Methodology***

The research examined:

- the experience of those who had used the NHS complaints process in the period 1 April 2005 - 31 March 2006 (i.e. the first full year of the operation of the revised NHS process) in two sample areas (Dumfries & Galloway and West Lothian - in the latter case limited to those who had complaints about St John's Hospital). There were 161 respondents to the survey, and 30 follow-up in-depth telephone interviews were carried out.
- the experience of those who took complaints about the NHS to the SPSO. This part of the research was Scotland-wide but the sample was small – 67 respondents, and 15 follow-up telephone interviews.

- barriers to complaining – i.e., if people were unhappy with some aspect of their dealings with the NHS but didn't complain, what stopped them? This part of the research fell into two parts:
  - (i) Surveying members of a citizens panel in West Lothian
  - (ii) In Dumfries & Galloway focus groups and interviews with representatives of eight different potentially excluded groups (unemployed people, young people, young homeless people, older people, carers, those with poor mental health, those with substance misuse issues and black and minority ethnics).

### ***Key findings***

- High levels of satisfaction with GP and hospital-based services
- Many barriers to complaining, including resignation (the most common reason selected from those who were dissatisfied but chose not to complain was 'I have come to expect these things')
- Widespread lack of information about the NHS complaints process
- Among those who did complain, there was much greater satisfaction with response from SPSO than from NHS (but there is a caveat in that the SPSO sample was small)
- The most common motivation for complaining to the NHS was to ensure the same thing didn't happen again and to improve service for others in the future. Many were also keen that an investigation into the problem took place. A substantial minority wanted to receive an apology and for the NHS to admit that they were wrong or had made a mistake.
- The most common motivation for complaining to the SPSO was to have an investigation take place and to find out what happened and why. This was followed by ensuring the same thing did not happen again and then by a desire to improve service for others in the future. As the single most important reason for complaining, this group were most likely to cite investigation of the problem, followed by receiving an apology and, closely after, making sure same thing did not happen again.

### ***Follow up***

In the light of the findings, the SPSO is taking action to address specific aspects of our service about which complainants expressed dissatisfaction, including:

- how we communicate how a decision was reached
- how we demonstrate that different points of views were explored in the course of an investigation

The research will also inform aspects of the Outreach Strategy for 2007-08 that relate to raising awareness among 'hard-to-reach' groups.

The findings are being shared with health sector bodies and other organisations such as the Scottish Consumer Council.

They will also inform the new programme to obtain more information about NHS patients' experiences which the Health Minister announced on 1 March 2007.  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/03/01103247>

**The project was put out to tender and the research was carried out between March and August 2006 by Craigforth Consultancy & Research.**