

General practice

Organisation of primary care services outside normal working hours

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Abstract

Objective: To determine the use and organisation of out of hours services in primary care.

Design: Telephone survey.

Setting: Family health services authorities in England and Wales.

Main outcome measures: Rate of use of out of hours care, methods of provision, and role of authorities.

Results: 12-25% of authorities were unable to answer one or more key questions in the survey because of insufficient information. The mean number of night visits made per unrestricted principal per 1000 patients per year was 35.3. 13 of the 19 authorities with averages above 40 covered large towns or cities. 81 authorities had at least one commercial deputising service. In 46 metropolitan districts and one other district over 75% of general practitioners had consent to use a deputising service, although not all did so. Information on cooperation between practices was limited. 22 cooperatives were recognised by the authorities, nine were not officially recognised, and a further 13 were nearing institution. Only two cooperatives were in areas with extensive use of deputising services.

Conclusion: Methods of providing out of hours care are changing, and without good information systems family health services authorities will not be able to monitor the effect on quality and cost effectiveness of care.