

**Inspecting Informing Improving**



Patient survey report 2004

- ambulance services



The survey of ambulance service users was designed, developed and coordinated by the NHS survey advice centre at Picker Institute Europe.

The Healthcare Commission exists to promote improvement in the quality of NHS and independent healthcare across England and Wales. It is a new organisation, which started work on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2004. The Healthcare Commission's full name is the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection.

The Healthcare Commission was created under the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003. The organisation has a range of new functions and takes over some responsibilities from other commissions. It:

- replaces the work of the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI), which closed on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2004
- takes over the private and voluntary healthcare functions of the National Care Standards Commission, which also ceased to exist on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2004
- picks up the elements of the Audit Commission's work which relate to efficiency, effectiveness and economy of healthcare

In taking over the functions of CHI, the Healthcare Commission now has responsibility for the programme of national patient surveys initiated by CHI. This report relates to a patient survey that was begun by CHI but is published by the Healthcare Commission. The Healthcare Commission has full responsibility for this report.

## Introduction

An important step to improving hospital, ambulance and other health services to ensure they are meeting the needs of the patient is to ask the patients themselves what they think about the NHS. One way of doing this is to carry out surveys of patients who have recently used health services. The Healthcare Commission is responsible for carrying out national surveys of the NHS. By running these surveys across the country and publishing the results, the Healthcare Commission is able to provide important feedback about the experience patients have of their local health services.

The Healthcare Commission has carried out five national surveys asking patients across England about their experiences of mental health, inpatient, ambulance, hospital care for children and primary care services. The NHS surveys advice centre at Picker Institute Europe developed the questionnaires and methodology<sup>1</sup>.

The Healthcare Commission and Picker Institute Europe are now publishing five reports on the key findings from the surveys, describing the experiences of patients of each of these services. This report summarises the key findings from the survey of ambulance services.

The Healthcare Commission will use the survey results as one way of assessing the performance of the NHS, and we expect individual trusts to use the results to identify how their services can be improved for patients.

Survey results for every NHS trust are available in detailed reports on the Healthcare Commission website [www.healthcarecommission.org.uk](http://www.healthcarecommission.org.uk)

## Who took part in the survey?

This survey covered only the emergency 999 and urgent calls attended by ambulance trusts. It includes both patients who were taken by the ambulance crew to hospital, and those who were attended to but not taken to hospital. Many ambulance trusts also provide patient transport services (PTS) to take patients to and from hospital and clinic appointments, but these services are not covered by this survey. Patients were asked to complete the survey by thinking about their most recent experience of the ambulance emergency or urgent service.

Each of the 31 ambulance trusts in England identified a list of 850 patients aged 16 or over who had been attended to by the trust as an emergency or urgent case during a one or two week period in October 2003. Not all ambulance trusts record and hold reliable name and address information electronically so paper patient report forms were used to identify eligible patients. In future, we would expect all ambulance trusts to have successfully implemented reliable electronic systems that record the home address of all patients they attend. Patients were sent a postal questionnaire and a covering letter, and up to two reminder letters were sent to non-responders.

Questionnaires were sent to 26,336 patients and 12,282 completed questionnaires were returned. This represents a response rate of 51%, once undelivered questionnaires and deceased patients had been accounted for. Response rates varied among trusts from 39% to 66%.

The questionnaire was largely composed of closed questions, but the final section invited respondents to comment in their own words on things that were particularly good about their care and things that could be improved. The quotes in boxes throughout this report are drawn from these comments and illustrate the survey findings.

The survey results show that, of respondents:

- 54% were women
- 14% were aged 16 to 35, 15% 36 to 50, 19% 51 to 65, and 53% 66 or older
- 97% of respondents were white, 2% were Asian or Asian British, 1% were black or black British, less than 1% were mixed race or from Chinese or other ethnic groups

It is important to compare the demographic characteristics of the responders and non-responders, as the responders may not be representative of all patients who use an NHS trust. Older patients, aged 51 and above, were more likely to complete the questionnaire than younger patients.

## Calling the ambulance

Of the patients who responded to the survey, 74% were at home when the ambulance was called, 14% were in a public place and 11% elsewhere.

In total, 13% of patients had called the ambulance themselves, and 48% reported that a friend or relative made the call to the emergency services. A doctor or NHS Direct had called an ambulance for 22% of patients, with the police making the call for 2%. In 7% of cases, a stranger had called the ambulance and in 8% of cases the caller was described as 'other' (often this would be a helpline service such as Lifeline).

## Ambulance call taker

The survey found that where the ambulance had been called either by the patient or by one of their friends or relatives, 95% felt that the ambulance telephone operator definitely listened carefully. Four per cent said the operator listened carefully to some extent and less than 1% did not think the operator listened carefully.

While 98% of patients felt the ambulance telephone operator easily understood their location, many comments indicated that the ambulance crew had difficulty finding the location.

"The ambulance and helicopter had difficulty in finding me. They had to phone me for fresh instructions"

"The crew had trouble finding my street because it's too small to feature on A-Z maps. I had to try to give directions"

Of those who did want advice over the phone from the ambulance telephone operator on what to do before the ambulance arrived, 84% received it. Eighty-four per cent of respondents stated the operator had definitely been reassuring and 15% found the operator reassuring to some extent.

“First-aider received phone instructions to enable her to treat injury sustained”

“My 11 year old son witnessed some attacks [fits] and called the service and [the] call taker helped him with advice and reassurance, which really helped, being so frightened”

## The ambulance crew

### Communication

When asked if the ambulance crew had listened to them carefully, 94% of patients reported that they definitely had. Six per cent said they had listened to some extent and only 1% of all patients said that the crew had not listened carefully. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents who reported being able to remember said that the ambulance crew had asked about their previous medical history.

The majority of patients (80%) felt that the ambulance crew had definitely explained their care and treatment in an understandable way. However, 16% said that the crew had done this only to some extent and 5% that they had not. This highlights an area for concern, particularly as it is important that patients understand explanations if they are to give informed consent for treatment.

“The ambulance crew were... extremely clear with their advice”

“Explanation of possible spinal injury [was good]”

Seven per cent of patients said that the ambulance crew definitely talked in front of them as if they were not there, and 7% felt that this happened to some extent. However, most patients (86%) who responded did not think the crew excluded them from any discussions.

“Although I was suffering from concussion, I felt very uninvolved in my treatment - that I wouldn't understand it or it wasn't important for me to know”

## Trust and confidence

Only a very small proportion of patients (1%) reported that they did not have trust and confidence in the ambulance crew's professional skills. Ninety-three per cent felt they definitely had trust and confidence in the crew's professional skills and 6% said that they did to some extent.

"Whole experience was efficient, reliable and inspired confidence in staff's abilities"

"The ambulance crew were all significantly experienced, and comforting"

Only a few patients (1%) did not find the ambulance crew reassuring. Ninety per cent found them definitely reassuring and 9% found them reassuring to some extent.

"I was frightened and confused, but the ambulance crew were very good and comforted and reassured me"

"The ambulance men were very friendly, and although I was a bit anxious about going to hospital, they helped to make me feel much more at ease"

## Pain

Just over one in five patients said they did not have any pain while in the ambulance. Of those who did experience pain, 81% felt the ambulance crew definitely did everything they could to control it. Fourteen per cent said the crew did this to some extent and 5% that the crew did not do everything they could to control their pain.

"They controlled my pain well"

"Care taken to ease the pain"

## Relatives

Of those respondents who had friends or relatives with them when the ambulance was called, 94% felt that their friends or relatives were given enough information about their care and treatment.

"The paramedics and ambulance crew were really helpful and reassuring to myself and to my family who were concerned about my welfare"

## Respect and dignity

Only 1% of patients did not feel the ambulance crew had treated them with respect and dignity. A further 5% reported that they had been treated with respect and dignity to some extent, but a large majority of patients (94%) felt they were treated with respect and dignity.

“Was treated with respect as a person, not just a statistic”

## Transfer to hospital

The majority of patients (91%) were taken to hospital the last time they used the emergency and urgent ambulance service. Ninety-eight per cent reported that the way in which they got into the ambulance was suitable.

“Helped me walk to the ambulance (sitting in a wheelchair was a definite no-no)”

“The crew should give [a] hand to the patient to get onto the stretcher, not leave him on his own”

Less than 1% of patients felt the ambulance was not very clean or not at all clean. Ten per cent felt it was fairly clean, and 90% said that the ambulance was very clean. Similarly, just 1% thought the ambulance driver did not take care to make the journey to hospital as comfortable as possible. Nine per cent reported that the driver attempted to make the journey comfortable to some extent and 91% said the driver definitely did.

“Made very comfortable during journey to hospital”

“[The ambulance driver] cared that I was as comfortable as I could be”

Of those who could remember if the ambulance crew gave all the necessary information about them to the hospital staff, 99% said that this had happened.

## Patients not taken to hospital

Only 9% of patients were not taken to hospital on the last occasion the emergency or urgent ambulance service attended them. Of these, 41% had been advised to go to hospital by the ambulance crew but had refused and 59% were not advised to go.

“Crew advised him to go to hospital but he chose not to go. Crew did right thing, it was his decision”



Of the patients not taken to hospital in the ambulance, 86% agreed with the decision not to go to hospital. Six per cent felt they should have been taken to hospital and another 8% were unsure of whether or not they agreed. Ninety-one per cent of patients not taken to hospital were given advice about what to do if they felt unwell again.

## Overall

The positive reports given by ambulance patients were reflected in their ratings of overall care. Seventy-two per cent rated the care they received from the ambulance service as excellent, 22% as very good and 4% as good. Only 1% rated the care they received as fair and ratings of poor or very poor each made up less than 1% of the total.

“Given utmost care and reassurance that I was in good hands, the medics came in to see me the next day, a very kind gesture”

“I took an overdose and the crew were very understanding and sympathetic”

“The crew were very understanding of people with learning disabilities”

## Conclusions

This is the first national survey of patients who have used urgent and emergency ambulance services, and the results are very encouraging. Ninety-eight per cent of patients rated their overall care as excellent, very good or good, and patients reported very positive experiences across most aspects of care. For example, almost all patients reported that ambulance crews listened to them carefully and treated them with respect and dignity, and that they had confidence and trust in the ambulance crews' professional skills.

Against this very positive overall, there are two areas where there is cause for concern and scope for improvement:

- nearly a fifth of patients reported that ambulance staff could have done more to help control pain
- a fifth of patients reported that they did not fully understand the ambulance crew's explanations of care and treatment: without such understanding, patients are not in a position to consent to treatment, and be involved in decisions about their care

In addition, a small number of areas showed substantial variation between ambulance trusts, and these should be addressed by individual trusts:

- the proportion of patients who received advice from the operator about what to do before the ambulance crew arrived varied from 71% to 91%
- the proportion of patients who were taken to hospital varied from 83% to 99%

## **Tables of results**

National average results are presented for each question, along with tables comparing respondents and non-respondents.

The results reported are results for the average ambulance trust in England. The responses from each trust have an equal influence over the national average, regardless of differences in response rate between trusts.

The proportion of responses to each response option for each individual question was calculated for each trust. The overall national average for a given response was then calculated as an average of all the trusts' proportions.

The only exceptions to this approach were in the figures for the demographics (for example age, sex and ethnic group). These are given as simple percentages, as it is more appropriate to present the real percentages of sampled patients and respondents, rather than average figures.

## Calling the ambulance

### Q1 Where were you when the ambulance was called?

	National average %	Number
At my home	74	
In a public place	14	
Somewhere else	11	
Total specific responses		11910
Missing responses		304
Don't know/can't remember		68

Answered by all

### Q2 Who called the ambulance?

	National average %	Number
I did	13	
A friend or relative	48	
My doctor, NHS Direct	22	
The police	2	
A stranger	7	
Other	8	
Total specific responses		11633
Missing responses		412
Don't know/can't remember		237

Answered by all

### Q3 Did the ambulance call taker listen carefully?

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	95	
Yes, to some extent	4	
No	0	
Total specific responses		6507
Missing responses		128
Don't know/can't remember		709

Answered by patients whose ambulance was called either by themselves, by a friend, or by a relative

**Q4 Did the ambulance call taker easily understand your location?**

	National average %	Number
Yes	98	
No	2	
Total specific responses		6708
Missing responses		148
Don't know/can't remember		497

Answered by patients whose ambulance was called either by themselves, by a friend, or by a relative

**Q5 Did the ambulance call taker give advice on the phone about what to do before the ambulance arrived?**

	National average %	Number
Yes	84	
No	16	
Total specific responses		4748
Missing responses		277
Don't know/can't remember		1392
No advice was wanted/needed		948

Answered by patients whose ambulance was called either by themselves, by a friend, or by a relative

**Q6 Was the ambulance call taker reassuring?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	84	
Yes, to some extent	15	
No	1	
Total specific responses		6032
Missing responses		281
Don't know/can't remember		1042

Answered by patients whose ambulance was called either by themselves, by a friend, or by a relative

## The ambulance crew

### Q7 Did the ambulance crew listen carefully?

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	94	
Yes, to some extent	6	
No	1	
Total specific responses		11311
Missing responses		277
Don't know/can't remember		694

Answered by all

### Q8 Did the ambulance crew ask about your previous medical history?

	National average %	Number
Yes	87	
No	13	
Total specific responses		10185
Missing responses		301
Don't know/can't remember		1796

Answered by all

### Q9 Did you have trust and confidence in the ambulance crew's professional skills?

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	93	
Yes, to some extent	6	
No	1	
Total specific responses		11806
Missing responses		194
Don't know/can't remember		282

Answered by all

**Q10 Were the ambulance crew reassuring?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	90	
Yes, to some extent	9	
No	1	
Total specific responses		11665
Missing responses		268
Don't know/can't remember		349

Answered by all

**Q11 Did the ambulance crew explain your care and treatment in a way you could understand?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	80	
Yes, to some extent	16	
No	5	
Total specific responses		10756
Missing responses		450
Don't know/can't remember		1076

Answered by all

**Q12 Did the ambulance crew talk in front of you as if you weren't there?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	7	
Yes, to some extent	7	
No	86	
Total specific responses		11132
Missing responses		351
Don't know/can't remember		799

Answered by all

**Q13 Did the ambulance crew do everything they could to help control your pain?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	81	
Yes, to some extent	14	
No	5	
Total specific responses		9178
Missing responses		530
I did not have any pain		2574

Answered by all

**Q14 If friends or relatives were with you, were they given enough information about your care and treatment?**

	National average %	Number
Yes	94	
No	6	
Total specific responses		7661
Missing responses		533
No friends or relatives were with me		3375
Don't know/can't remember		713

Answered by all



## Transfer to hospital

**Q15 Were you taken to a hospital in the ambulance?**

	National average %	Number
Yes	91	
No.	9	
Total specific responses		11707
Missing responses		575

Answered by all

**Q16 Was the way you got into the ambulance suitable (e.g. by walking, on a stretcher etc?)**

	National average %	Number
Yes	98	
No	2	
Total specific responses		10278
Missing responses		213
Don't know/can't remember		365

Answered by patients who were taken to a hospital in the ambulance

**Q17 How clean was the ambulance?**

	National average %	Number
Very clean	90	
Fairly clean	10	
Not very clean	0	
Not at all clean	0	
Total specific responses		8850
Missing responses		238
Don't know/can't remember		1801

Answered by patients who were taken to a hospital in the ambulance

**Q18 Did the ambulance driver take care to make the journey as comfortable as possible?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	91	
Yes, to some extent	9	
No	1	
Total specific responses		10121
Missing responses		160
Don't know/can't remember		605

Answered by patients who were taken to a hospital in the ambulance

**Q19 As far as you know, did the ambulance crew give hospital staff all the necessary information about you?**

	National average %	Number
Yes	99	
No	1	
Total specific responses		9031
Missing responses		177
Don't know/can't remember		1666

Answered by patients who were taken to a hospital in the ambulance

**Q20 Did the ambulance crew advise you to go to hospital?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, but I refused	41	
No.	59	
Total specific responses		1179
Missing responses		92

Answered by patients who were not taken to a hospital in the ambulance

**Q21 Did you agree with the decision not to go to hospital?**

	National average %	Number
Yes	86	
No	6	
Not sure	8	
Total specific responses		1112
Missing responses		150

Answered by patients who were not taken to a hospital in the ambulance

**Q22 Did the ambulance crew give you advice about what to do if you felt unwell again?**

	National average %	Number
Yes	91	
No	9	
Total specific responses		1006
Missing responses		84
Don't know/can't remember		64
No advice was wanted, needed		141

Answered by patients who were not taken to a hospital in the ambulance

## Overall

**Q23 Overall, how would you rate the care you received from the ambulance service?**

	National average %	Number
Excellent	72	
Very good	22	
Good	4	
Fair	1	
Poor	0	
Very poor	0	
Total specific responses		11535
Missing responses		747

Answered by all

**Q24 Overall, did the ambulance crew treat you with respect and dignity?**

	National average %	Number
Yes, definitely	94	
Yes, to some extent	5	
No	1	
Total specific responses		11354
Missing responses		725
Don't know/can't remember		203

Answered by all

## About you

**Q25 To which of these ethnic groups would you say you belong?**

	National average %	Number
White	97	
Mixed	0	
Asian or Asian British	2	
Black or Black British	1	
Chinese or other ethnic group	0	
Total specific responses		11900
Missing responses		382

Answered by all

**Q26 Are you male or female?**

	National average %	Number
Male	46	
Female	54	
Total specific responses		11813
Missing responses		469

Answered by all

**Proportion of respondents in different age groups**

	National average %	Number
<= 35	14	
36-50	15	
51-65	19	
> 65	53	
Total specific responses		12236
Missing responses		46

Answered by all

## Response breakdown

### Adjusted response rates by age group

Age group	Adjusted response rate %	Number
16-35	34	5005
36-50	47	3523
51-65	64	3472
>65	58	9774
Total	52	21774

### Adjusted response rates by sex

Sex	Adjusted response rate %	Number
Male	50	10680
Female	53	11681
Total	51	22361

### Adjusted response rates by age and sex

Sex	Age group	Adjusted response rate %	Number
Male	16-35	29	2506
	36-50	44	1855
	51-65	61	1900
	>65	61	4114
Female	16-35	39	2494
	36-50	51	1662
	51-65	67	1567
	>65	56	5636

## References

1. Dunckley M, Osborn C, Reeves R, Magee H. *Development and pilot testing of the questionnaire for use in NHS Trust-based Ambulance Emergency Services patient survey*. [http://www.nhssurveys.org/docs/AMB2004\\_Development\\_Report.pdf](http://www.nhssurveys.org/docs/AMB2004_Development_Report.pdf). 2004. Oxford, Picker Institute Europe.

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