BMA quarterly tracker survey

An extract of responses from GPs

Health Policy and Economic Research Unit
Background

- The BMA’s Health Policy and Economic Research Unit (HPERU) manage an online panel of approximately 3,000 member doctors.

- The panel is broadly representative of the main areas of medical practice and is used for the quarterly tracker survey on regular and topical health questions.

- The survey includes regular questions on current workload, morale and future intentions.

- The present survey also included a separate module of questions for GPs covering patient demand and extended hours.
Methodology

- The quarterly tracker survey was sent to all panel members excluding retired and medical students (sample size approximately 2,650).
- Of the 2,650 panel members, 820 were GPs.
- Panel members were emailed a link to the survey between 4 and 24 February 2014.
- 420 replies were received from GPs: a response rate of 51.2%
- This analysis is of GPs’ responses.
- Responses for GPs are accurate to within +/- 3.3% at the 95% confidence level.
- Where relevant, responses were analysed by factors such as morale and workload and any wider implication for the results is stated.
Demand in general practice
GPs’ response to demand in general practice

GPs were asked if their practice was changing in response to their patients’ needs. Eight in 10 GPs said they were responding to an increased demand for emergency appointments.

- Demand for more emergency appointments: 81.7%
- Preference for weekday evening appointments: 50.6%
- Patients’ preference to see the same doctor: 44.0%
- Demand for more services within the practice (diagnostic procedures): 35.3%
- Preference for weekend appointments: 18.9%
Is your practice considering applying, or has it already applied, to the Government fund to increase extended hours provision?

Almost one-fifth of GPs said their practice had applied, or might apply, for funding to increase the number of hours they are open to patients.

One-third of respondents reported they already offered extended hours.
To what extent, if at all, is inappropriate use of emergency appointments a problem in your practice?

More than four in 10 GPs told us that they perceived the inappropriate use of emergency appointments to be a significant or frequent problem in their practice.
Does your practice currently use a system of triage to book patient appointments?

Four in 10 GPs told us their practice used a triage system to manage patient appointments according to priority.

In a separate analysis, there was no obvious relationship between use of triage systems and perceived misuse of emergency appointments.

Triage is not a significant predictor of the demand for emergency appointments in this survey.

Future questioning would require ‘triage’ to be better defined.
Current Morale
Taking everything into account, how would you describe your current level of morale?

Over half of all GPs that responded to the survey rated their current morale as low or very low.

Using a 5-point scale (1=low, 5=high) the mean score for all GPs was 3.56 points.

This score will be tracked in future quarters.
Current Workload
Collectively, more than nine in 10 GPs perceived their workload to be heavy/high.

Over half of all GPs considered their current level of workload to be unmanageable or unsustainable.
In the last month, how often have you worked or trained outside your regular hours?

Almost half of GPs reported always working outside their regular hours in the last month.

The proportion of GPs working outside their ‘regular’ hours for a prolonged period, raises a question of what becomes assumed as ‘regular’.

In this question there may be some conflation between ‘regular’, ‘desirable’ or ‘expected’ hours under the GP contract.
What was the reason for working/training outside of your regular hours?

More than nine in 10 GPs said that ‘too much work’ was responsible for working outside their regular hours.
Future intentions
In the last year have you ever considered any of the following?

Almost six in 10 GPs have considered retiring early.

Half of GPs have considered reducing their hours to work less than full-time.

Over a quarter of GPs said they had considered leaving the profession entirely.
Steps taken to change work life balance

When prompted further:

Overall, almost half of GPs said they were taking or had taken action to change their work life balance.

Specifically, 37% of GPs were in the process of planning early retirement.

36% were actively making plans to work less than full-time.
Summary

• GPs are changing to take account of increasing demand, such as by increasing their emergency appointments.

• More than half of GPs rate their morale as low.

• More than half of all GPs consider their current workload to be unmanageable/unsustainable.

• Almost half of all GPs reported always working outside their regular hours in the last month.

• Nearly all GPs said this was due to their workload being too high.

• Almost half of GPs were taking action to change their work life balance – many are planning early retirement or reducing their hours.