

Rating hospitals

Adding voice to choice

What the patients actually think

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IN MOST markets, consumers drive up standards because they can vote with their feet. One reason why it is difficult to improve the quality of health care in the NHS is that this sanction has been missing. The government now wants to promote choice by giving people the right to decide among different hospitals when their doctor refers them for elective treatments. But how are patients to make the choice?

The advice of GPs counts for a lot. The Healthcare Commission, an independent watchdog, provides ratings for the quality of services in English hospitals. All this helps, but it leaves out the direct views of patients themselves. Now they can be found on a pioneering [website](http://www.patientopinion.org.uk/) (<http://www.patientopinion.org.uk/>) that Paul Hodgkin, a GP in Sheffield, has set up.

“Patient Opinion” lets people post their own views about how they have been treated in acute-care hospitals. The website provides feedback about the qualitative aspects of service, such as whether patients were kept informed or treated with respect, that often tend to be ignored. Clearly this is useful to potential patients, but Dr Hodgkin says it should also help hospitals to do better by putting right the faults that are pointed out. Meanwhile positive reactions encourage staff who are already doing a good job.

The website started in South Yorkshire in the autumn of 2005 and extended its coverage to the rest of England last year. So far it has attracted 1,700 comments, of which half have been appreciative, a quarter critical and the remainder mixed. The potential for growth is clear as more people find out about it when seeking guidance on which hospital to choose.

The website is run as a social enterprise—a business with public-interest objectives. Its income flows from the NHS hospitals and other organisations that subscribe to it. In return they can respond to each comment and receive summary reports, including comparisons with other hospitals.

Dr Hodgkin says that the internet is now “democratising voice”. Certainly, patient voice should reinforce patient choice—one reason why the NHS has encouraged the initiative.

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