



What's it like being in a hospital waiting room?

People's views: Birmingham
Dental Hospital



Contents

Birmingham Dental Hospital	3
Key findings	3
Introduction	4
Background	4
Stage 1	4
Stage 2	4
Birmingham Dental Hospital	6
What people said	6
Waiting times	6
Environment	6
Accessibility	7
Communication	7
Dignity and respect	8
Summary	8
Recommendations	9
Trust's Response	10
Healthwatch Birmingham's Response	11
References and Endnotes	12



Birmingham Dental Hospital

Key findings



Patients found waiting times to be generally good, although in a small number of cases, people waited for several hours



Many patients complimented staff on their professionalism, although there were two instances of poor communication



People found the hospital to be generally clean, with one exception



People who use a wheelchair said it was difficult to access the building, and the disabled toilets were not in working order



Patients valued highly the quality of the waiting area environment, which was said to be light and airy with good facilities, although some people said refreshments were expensive and lacked variety



Several people had difficulty in contacting the hospital by telephone to rearrange an appointment or to book an appointment at a convenient time



People felt the signage could be improved by making it bigger and the words used more recognisable



Patients with autism receive high-quality care



Several patients struggled to hear their name being called, particularly those with a hearing impairment



Patients greatly valued the high quality of treatment and care being offered by hospital staff.





Introduction

In 2018, Healthwatch Birmingham asked members of the public across the City to share their views about what NHS or social care topics we should investigate next. People voted on five key health and care issues, and 71% of them asked us to evaluate the quality of service in waiting rooms in Birmingham's hospitals. This report, one of a series of nine for the hospital trusts we looked at, presents the results of that work for Birmingham Dental Hospital.



Background

We started our investigation into NHS hospital waiting rooms in Birmingham in autumn 2018. Our main focus was on people's experiences of waiting times, the environment, communication, accessibility, and dignity and respect.

To capture a representative sample of patients' views across Birmingham, our investigation consisted of two stages.

Stage 1

We collected feedback directly from patients who were in hospital waiting rooms, so that we would have information on the experience of patients in real time.

Stage 2

We worked closely with third-sector organisations (including Birmingham Focus, BID Services and deafPLUS) and interpreters to host focus groups to collect the experiences of people who have a visual and/or hearing impairment. Focus groups were held in four districts of Birmingham.

Healthwatch Birmingham also developed an online questionnaire to collect feedback from people with a visual and/or hearing impairment. This questionnaire included the same questions that were asked during our visits to waiting rooms and at focus group meetings. It was shared with the support of third-sector groups (including Birmingham's Disability Resource Centre, Action on Hearing Loss, Thomas Pocklington Trust and the National Deaf Children's Society) and extensive use of social media. The online questionnaire was available from 25 January to 8 February 2019.

Patients could choose to remain anonymous, or provide their contact details. A selection of patients who chose the latter were contacted again to participate in more in-depth interviews. We wrote these up as case studies.

We also looked at research on the effect of the experience of waiting on patient well-being. Poorly designed, uncomfortable waiting rooms and long waiting times have been found to contribute to a patient's stress and anxiety, perhaps because in addition to physical discomfort or accessibility problems, these spaces send a negative message that patients are a lower priority than the overall hospital system.^{1,2} Other issues, such as anxiety, insecurity, thirst and hunger, are not always easily detected by busy healthcare professionals, leading to a failure to offer appropriate and timely patient care.³ The quality of the waiting experience can also affect recovery times and mental well-being: a therapeutic waiting area design is associated with improved mood and greater satisfaction with healthcare services.⁴

Patients come into contact with the NHS at their most vulnerable, so emotions and negative feelings are heightened. The government's best practice guidance notes that it is important for NHS organisations to ensure that patients' emotional and physical needs are met at all stages of their journey:

For example, a patient kept waiting for an appointment ... may have a good emotional experience if they feel someone cares about them (that is, they are given regular information about why they are being kept waiting and an update on how long they will have to wait). The same patient left to wait without any information is likely to have a negative experience because they feel abandoned and neglected. Improving patients' emotional experience is about treating people as we would want to be treated - with dignity and respect.⁵

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 states that hospitals must provide 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled people to enable them to access services more effectively. The more recent Accessibility and Information Standard (AIS) further emphasises the need to ensure that providers are identifying, recording, flagging, sharing and meeting the information and communication needs of service users, for example to support people who have aphasia, autism or a mental health condition that affects their ability to communicate.⁶



Birmingham Dental Hospital

Birmingham Dental Hospital is located in Edgbaston Ward, Edgbaston. It provides a range of dental services for the people of West Midlands and further afield, and also trains dentists through its partnership with the University of Birmingham. It is managed by Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

As part of this study Healthwatch Birmingham heard 488 pieces of feedback from people across Birmingham, of which we heard 46 pieces of feedback from people about their experiences of Birmingham Dental Hospital. Feedback was heard through our online Feedback Centre, Information and Signposting Service and through our Community and Engagement activities. This included waiting areas in the Outpatient Departments.

What people said

Waiting times

From those patients who mentioned waiting times, most said these were generally good. However, some patients did experience long waits on occasion, although this was off set by the good service people felt they had received.

They are very good and I am very happy, although I waited for over 45 minutes.

It was a 35-minute wait, which I think is ok. They identified my problem and solved it. Overall good.

I have been waiting for the last hour to be seen. It's a long wait, but overall, it's a good service and staff are helpful.

When waiting, patients sometimes need refreshments. The availability of refreshments was considered to be good by most people we asked, although one patient found that the refreshments were expensive and the variety offered was poor.

Food outlet lacks variety and price is high.

Environment

Most people rated the cleanliness of the hospital as good, and said that waiting areas were comfortable. However, one patient had a negative experience because they found the walls in the toilets to be dirty and the disabled toilet out of use.

Very modern and clean hospital, with kids playing area and clean toilets and organised seating arrangements.

Waiting areas are clean and fine.

Walls of toilets are dirty. Disabled toilet was out of order for weeks.

Everyone who responded was pleased with the general design of the waiting areas. Patients enjoyed the bright, airy feel. Access to a breast-feeding room was particularly valued by one patient who came with her baby.

As a parent who is breast feeding, I find having a parent room right next to the waiting area very convenient. I come to the Dental Hospital every 6 weeks, accompanying my teenage daughter. This facility has been crucial in enabling me to do this easily.

Accessibility

There were lower satisfaction levels with the quality of the signage. Some patients found the signs confusing and too small to be seen. For example, they did not associate the term 'imaging' with X-rays.

People get confused by the signposts for x-rays as it says 'Imaging'. Myself and few others were looking for the x-ray department and struggled a lot until I was told to go to Imaging.

Only thing they need is brighter signposting for toilets and other facilities. Also all sign boards are too small to be noticed.

Many patients found the system of calling patients by name ineffective. Some patients didn't hear their name being called, and felt anxious in case they missed their slot.

This is a good service, but calling patients should be done both by display screen and in a loud voice.

Communication

For those patients who mentioned staff attitudes, most were extremely happy with the support and help they received from staff. Patients confirmed that staff were kind, approachable and professional.

I hate dentists, but here they are very good and helpful. This place itself is very nice, I will give them full marks. Well done and very good.

The Dental Hospital is amazing and the people are kind, professional, and enthusiastic and work with me in collaboration.

Right from the time we entered, all members of staff made us feel really welcome and at ease. The staff were very thorough and the dentist explained everything that would be happening.

There were some examples, however, where patients felt they hadn't been kept informed well enough. On two occasions, patients were left in waiting rooms with no communication.



This is a good service, but calling patients should be done both by display screen and in a loud voice.

Appointment at 10am, was called in within 10 minutes, but the x-ray machine wasn't working properly, so was asked to wait in waiting area. Now been waiting 45 minutes and no one has come out to see us. I had to ask a member of staff to find out what the hold-up was. It looks like we had been missed off the radar. Very disappointing when you are having to wait all this time with an anxious child.

Communication with the hospital's administration was rated less highly. A number of patients told us about the problems they had in communicating with the hospital by telephone. Patients stated that they had to wait a long time in the telephone queueing system, with patients waiting up to 45 minutes for calls to be answered. Waiting times for appointments were sometimes too long, and for one patient, it was hard to make an appointment at a convenient time.

My last appointment was cancelled and I was informed by letter about it and then I had to wait for a long time, three months, for second one, which is bad.

They are very good and systematic - only downside is when you call them to rearrange the appointment, you have to wait in a long queue and it takes 30 mins on hold to get them. They should have proper call centre.

Dignity and respect

Patients who use wheelchairs reported difficulties in accessing the rear entrance of the building and raised concerns about the disabled toilets being out of order for many weeks. These situations greatly affect patient's dignity because it increases feelings of isolation and makes them reliant on others for help.

Downside is the difficult disabled access from rear entrance. Manual help recommended.

People said that the quality of care provided to children with autism is high. Staff demonstrated a high level of knowledge and awareness of the needs of these patients and have helped patients to contribute to their own care plans.

I wish all services were like this. Check-in was great, seen by lovely dentists and staff, had to go to x-rays, quick and easy, everything was explained clearly, as my son has autism the language used was great -no hospital jargon, just plain understanding.

Summary

During our study of Birmingham Dental Hospital, we heard how appreciative patients are of the care and treatment they receive from the hospital. The majority of people taking part in our study found staff to be professional and helpful. They fully involved patients in making decisions about their treatment.

This is my second visit. I give them 5/5 because: good waiting times, parking availability, and very helpful staff at all levels. It's a super hospital.

Birmingham Dental Hospital have given me excellent service. Staff are very friendly and explanatory. They are very professional and the care for you is paramount.

Bang on time, very good. I have been here a number of times and they are very good.

However, concerns raised should not be overlooked, particularly in relation to access for people with disabilities (both to the building itself and to toilet facilities), and consideration of the needs of people with visual or hearing impairments in the way patients are notified that it is their turn to see the dentist.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback from service users, Healthwatch Birmingham recommends that the trust:



Reviews its current performance management systems to ensure that cleanliness improves and is more responsive to patient and staff feedback, for example by implementing spot-checks of toilets and waiting areas



Undertakes a review of electronic signage across the hospital and considers using a similar electronic system as used in The Royal Orthopaedic Hospital to keep patients up to date with waiting times and which room they need to go to



Works with patients to identify the areas where signage is most crucial and uses this feedback to draw up an action plan to improve the quality of signage to meet a range of patient needs, including using words that patients can readily understand and recognise



Reviews access for disabled people to make sure that people who use a wheelchair are easily able to access the hospital building and have the constant use of disabled toilets.



Reviews the efficiency and response times of call handling and produces an action plan to address the issues identified

NHS trusts should work with community and service user organisations, and directly with those with disabilities, impairment or sensory loss, to understand what actions need to be taken to improve people's experience of waiting areas. Working in collaboration in this way will ensure actions are patient-centred and meaningful, and will make a difference.

In six months time, Healthwatch Birmingham will track the progress of these improvements, requesting an update from the Trust which evaluates the specific changes made to improve patient's experiences of waiting rooms.



Trust's Response

Dental Services Division, Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Response

Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (BCHC) Dental Services Division are appreciative of the time and care taken by the Healthwatch Birmingham team, who spoke to 48 patients during their visit to audit our waiting areas on 12th December 2018. The feedback was shared and discussed at our Divisional Quality Committee meeting which took place on 7th March 2019. Alison Last, Director of Patient Experience has also responded individually to each item on the Healthwatch Birmingham website on behalf of the Trust.

It was pleasing to hear about the positive areas highlighted by patients, who appreciated the check-in process, the care and understanding from staff, the holistic assessment process that included taking necessary x-rays on the same day and the general environment of the Hospital.

We were also pleased to be given the opportunity to address some of our not so good points. People commented on the waiting times and some patients felt they had waited a long time (35 to 60 minutes) to see someone after their arrival. Others commented there was little entertainment particularly for children. The long waiting time was also commented on in relation to contacting the Hospital by telephone and navigating the call centre system.

In relation to making contact with the hospital we acknowledge there have been challenges with this system and following discussions at both our Divisional Quality Committee & Patient Engagement Forum are currently reviewing communication & access to our services. This work is ongoing and will be monitored via our Divisional Quality Committee.

Whilst we acknowledge the actual root cause of the waiting time needs to be addressed, since December last year we have taken steps to provide the Children's and Orthodontic Department waiting areas with 'Starlight' distraction boxes and magazines to include items suitable for children in racks provided in waiting areas. These are supplied and updated regularly by an external contractor.

Staff have been made aware that people in waiting areas can be distracted or unable to hear when their names are being called out- staff and students have been encouraged to step further into the waiting areas and to speak louder when calling in their patients. We have placed whiteboards in waiting areas to help inform patients in writing of "wait times". There is an ongoing project regarding the use of waiting areas TV Screens to facilitate the provision of important information to patients to include clinical waiting times and/or delays along with other items such as health promotion activities, live travel feeds as well as dental specific information.

In order to find out what may be causing some patients to wait longer for their appointment, we have discussed the issues within Quality Committee, which is attended by Heads of Service/senior dental staff and managers. One suggestion has been to review clinic timings and capacity within each area to understand the specific cause as to why people are waiting. As part of the Divisional Governance review arrangements a clinical capacity review has been undertaken which we hope will inform future clinical planning etc.

An internal review of signage has taken place, and based on this and other feedback received from patients we will be updating signage including that used to support patients attending the X-Ray department.

The Division have introduced Customer Care Training for front line staff as well as Human Factors training which we envisage will support more positive patient experiences going forward.

Administration and clinical teams have also been reminded to ensure that delays are minimized when patients have been transferred to and from the X-Ray department.

We are very proud of our new Dental Hospital and are very keen to ensure this is kept as good as new. We have shared relevant feedback in relation to the cleanliness of toilets and public areas with our contract cleaners and are currently working with them to introduce a more robust system for supporting the maintenance & cleanliness of our facilities and also to support patients who may need to highlight any areas that are not up to standard.

In conclusion, we are very pleased with the many positive comments and we have addressed or are addressing all the issues raised in the Healthwatch Birmingham report. We have shared this report with our staff and students and thanked them for providing an excellent experience to the majority of our patients.

We welcome further visits and reports from Healthwatch Birmingham that supports our Divisional work that ensures we hear the patient voice and that any concerns identified are addressed.

Healthwatch Birmingham's Response

Healthwatch Birmingham will request the following information, for inclusion in our six-month follow-up report.

In six months we will require the Dental Services Division, Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to provide evidence the following.

- Findings of reviews undertaken as a result of the recommendations, detailing any changes made by the Trust.
- Current patient feedback heard by the Trust that demonstrates that all the issues highlighted in our recommendations have been resolved.
- Current patient feedback heard by the trust that demonstrates improvement through the following initiatives:
 - 'Starlight' distraction boxes
 - Hospital staff improving the way they announce which patient is next.

References and Endnotes

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- ⁶Accessible Information Standard: Overview 2017/18. At www.england.nhs.uk/publication/accessible-information-standard-overview-20172018/

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