

Your Which?

THE LATEST ON WHICH? AND OUR CAMPAIGNS

NHS dental treatment must be polished up



Which? chief executive Peter Vicary-Smith on the results of our recent checkup on NHS dentists

If you read the newspapers, you'd be forgiven for thinking the chances of finding an NHS dentist are slim. But, according to recent Which? research, such headlines tell only half the story.

I was surprised to learn that problems with access to NHS dentistry affected relatively few consumers. In our survey, of the two in three adults (68%) who had attempted to make an NHS appointment in the past two years, around nine out of ten were able to do so.

That's not to say we didn't find serious problems with access for a minority. And, living in the countryside – where our research shows fewer NHS dentists are open for new business – I've certainly found it to be a problem.

It's time the government fixed this. Everybody should be able to access good NHS treatment.

To help our research, we asked you to tell us about your dentistry experiences. I'd like to thank those who did. Your stories have helped us to understand what consumers

are really experiencing when they seek dental treatment.

What struck us were stories relating to quality and value. A lack of clarity over service levels, unexpected costs and variation in treatments that dentists will and won't perform on the NHS has led to confusion and mistrust.

We have presented these findings to a government-commissioned independent review of NHS dentistry, with suggestions for practical solutions, and we'll continue to press for them.

Now we want to check up on private dentists. Our super-complaint to the OFT in 2001 showed that private patients had been subjected to a lack of clear information about treatments and prices, and that there were poor complaints and redress systems.

Private dentists have had ample time to implement OFT recommendations to improve the situation, and we want to know how private patients are now faring. Please tell us your stories (good and bad) at www.which.co.uk/dentiststory.

Which? says

Right to complain

The system of complaining about health services in England has just changed. Reform was long overdue. But, in terms of making sure your voice is heard, this is only the beginning.

Our research has shown that few people with cause for dissatisfaction about NHS care have made formal complaints. Many thought the process was too complicated – others thought that complaining wouldn't make a difference or wanted to forget about their experiences.

The Department of Health says the new process will be simpler and quicker. Now, complaints should be made first to the NHS care provider or the local primary care trust. Complaints that aren't resolved at this level can be taken to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

Our guide to the new system, which merges social and health care complaints handling, may help you – see www.which.co.uk/nhscomplaints.

We'll be keeping a close eye on the new process – we're already concerned about the lack of recommended timescales for complaint resolution and the capacity of the ombudsmen to deal with unresolved complaints.

In particular, we'll look at whether the barriers that stop people from complaining are removed and whether feedback is collected from those using the new system.

Claire Lilley, senior policy adviser



Are you feeling the heat?

Help us keep tabs on gas and electricity charges

Last month (p4), we reported that many of you are paying too much for gas and electricity, as high direct debits don't account for low use in the summer. Also, in our utilities satisfaction survey (p40), only Utility Warehouse achieved five stars for 'clarity of bills'. Our campaigns team

is pushing regulator Ofgem, the government and suppliers for simpler billing – so you can keep an eye on your energy use and make sure you're getting the best deal.

We want to hear your views and experiences of energy bill frustrations. Visit www.which.co.uk/energystory to find out more.

