

Access to Sexual Health Clinics in the UK; a mystery shopping telephone service evaluation

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Background

In recent years there has been a change to demand on Sexual Health Clinics, putting pressure on already strained resources. This, coupled with drastic changes to the structure and funding of the NHS, has brought major concerns about the standard of care and the availability of access to Sexual Health Clinics. Research is needed to see if free, confidential and open access is available. **NICE guidelines state that at least 98% of patients contacting the clinic should be offered an appointment within two working days.**

Aim

This project was a **service evaluation** to investigate the state of access to GUM clinics in the UK and to see if the NICE guideline for access is being upheld.

Methodology

In October 2019, a list of all Sexual Health Clinics across the UK was compiled using the BASHH clinic finder. Their opening times, phone numbers and address were researched. **Clinics open for more than 2 days a week were telephoned by 3 different researchers.** Two researchers posed as a female patient with **symptoms suggestive of genital herpes and one as an asymptomatic chlamydia patient.** It was recorded if the two-day access guideline was met. Calls were staggered between all mystery shoppers so that clinics were not called the same week. Collected data was then analyzed using SPSS.

Discussion

It is clear that clinics did not meet the NICE recommendation of 98% of patients being seen within 2 working days. One limitation is the walk-in clinics offered were not a guarantee that the patient would be **seen within two working days.** These were offered in 54.5% of cases across the three researchers. Furthermore, researchers posing as mystery shoppers may have been more persistent than real patients.

Results

The researcher posing as the asymptomatic chlamydia patients were offered an appointment within **two working days in 89.2% of cases.** Access between the regions ranged from 50% to 100% (the latter was achieved in eight of the BASHH regions). There was a significant difference in the levels of access in the different regions ($\chi^2=32.180$, $df=17$, $P<0.014$). In Wessex, two-day access was upheld for 90% of these calls.

The two researchers posing as symptomatic genital herpes patients were offered an appointment sooner. Researcher A was offered an appointment within 48 hours in **92.5%** of cases and researcher B in **92.9%** of calls.

In 54.5% of all cases patients were offered a time to attend a **walk-in clinic rather than being given a specific appointment.**

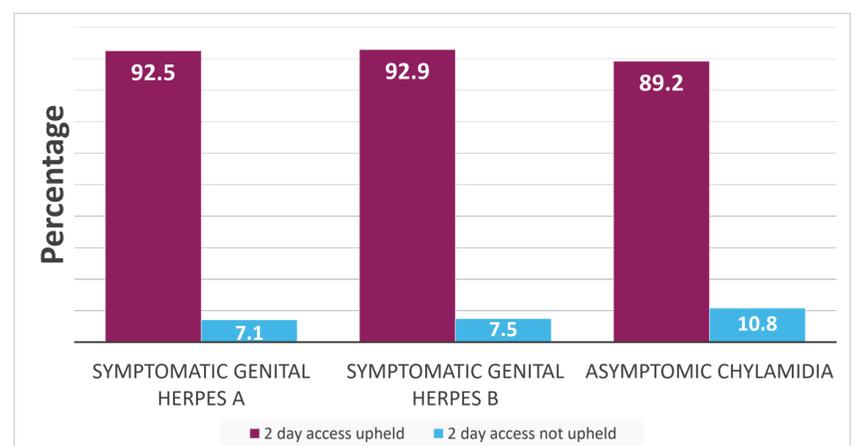


Figure 1: Comparing if two working day access was upheld for different researchers:

Conclusion

As seen from this study, improvements can still be made in access to GUM clinics. This is especially true for the two-day access window not being met for the asymptomatic chlamydia patients in **10.8%** of cases. In all cases (both with an asymptomatic chlamydia patient and symptomatic genital herpes patients) the state of access was **below the 98% goal.** This study shows that improvements to access need to be seen in Sexual Health clinics across the UK. Further research into

- if this guideline is maintained and
- the waiting time for a walk in clinic should be investigated.