

The impact of continuity of primary care on patient complaints in England

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Relational continuity of care, the extent to which patients continuously see their preferred general practitioner (GP), has been steadily declining in England over the past two decades. Previous research has explored the implications of this decline on a range of outcomes, including the use of secondary health care, the costs of care, and even mortality.

The focus of our research was to explore how patients themselves respond to declining continuity of care. In particular, we looked at whether the inability to continuously see a preferred GP is associated with increases in the number of new complaints against general practices in the English NHS.

Using a wide range of information from the GP patient survey (2016-2022) and other national sources, we linked data on written patient complaints with data on patient reported measures of continuity of care. We also included other aspects of GP practices such as care capacity, quality, waiting time, payments, workforce, and measures of deprivation.

We found that between 2016/2017 and 2022/2023, an average of about 12% of patients reported that they never or almost never saw their preferred doctor. Over the same period, practices reported on average 13.76 new complaints per 10,000 patients.

Our analysis showed that every 10 percentage-point increase in patients reporting they never see their preferred GP was associated with practices experiencing an average of 1.34 additional complaints per 10,000 patients. This effect was most pronounced in the post-pandemic period, among practices with historically high continuity, and in socioeconomically deprived areas.

We also explored the potential channels that might explain the relationship between continuity of care and complaints by using data on patients' views about the level of trust they held in health professionals and the extent to which their clinical needs were met. Our results showed that lost trust and unmet care needs did not appear to be the main pathways driving the relationship between continuity and complaints. Instead, they suggest that the disruption of a stable and continued GP-patient relationship itself is the main reason for patient complaints.

Our research highlights an often-overlooked consequence of declining continuity: when patients lose the ability to see their preferred GP, they are more likely to be dissatisfied with their experience and to complain. If policymakers and practitioners can find ways of supporting continuity, for example, by operating within smaller teams, this may help improve patient satisfaction as well as reduce complaints.

[Read the full paper, funding sources and disclaimers in BMJ Quality & Safety. Read the associated Editorial in the same journal.](#)

January 2026