

# CHE Research Summary 1

## Is bigger better in primary care?

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General practices vary in terms of the number of patients to whom they provide health care. In England, there has been a trend to having fewer but bigger GP practices in primary care. Larger practices may be able to provide more responsive services and achieve better health outcomes than smaller practices due to the way in which they are organised, although evidence so far is mixed. Since April 2019, GP practices have been required to join a Primary Care Network (PCN) which provides care for between 35,000 - 50,000 patients. The idea is that PCNs allow GP practices to achieve some of the gains from being larger through collaboration with other local practices, rather than by formal mergers.

Our research investigated the relationship between practice size, patient satisfaction and clinical quality to see if PCNs are likely to achieve the expected benefits for patients. We used a larger dataset and improved methods compared with previous research.

We found that patients from bigger GP practices reported worse satisfaction than patients from smaller practices with the opening hours of the practice and with the care they received. They were also less likely to report being able to see their

preferred GP and less likely to recommend their practice to others. We also found that bigger GP practices did not always achieve better health outcomes than smaller practices. Larger practices had lower scores for routine measures of quality of care and also lower rates for prescribing of generic medicines, which are less costly for the NHS. However, the larger practices did better than smaller ones in terms of preventing emergency hospital admissions for health problems that can be managed in primary care and having lower antibiotic prescribing rates.

This research suggests that, overall, there is no evidence that bigger practices provide better care to their patients. It means that the benefits of policies to encourage larger practices will depend on the judgements about whether the value of improved performance on some aspects of care outweighs worse performance on other features of care.

**Read the full article [here](#)**

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