Insights from the clinical assurance of service reconfiguration in the NHS: the drivers of reconfiguration and the evidence that underpins it – a mixed-methods study

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Declared competing interests of authors: Nigel Edwards ran a number of learning activities for the Chief Executive Officers of small hospitals.

Published March 2015
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03090

Plain English summary

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Health Services and Delivery Research 2015; Vol. 3: No. 9
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03090

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Clinical services in the NHS are frequently subject to reconfiguration. This means changes to the location and the type of service being offered. Yet it is rare for reconfiguration to hospital services to be evaluated. This means that there is a lack of evidence to help guide service change.

This research set out to discover which services are being reconfigured and why, and what evidence is being used to guide this. We have drawn two main sources of information. First, we reviewed the reports produced by the National Clinical Advisory Team (NCAT). This is a team of clinical experts who, until March 2014, advised the NHS when making changes to hospital services. Second, we have looked for research evidence that would support the changes to services that the NCAT advised on.

We found that many places are reconfiguring clinical services by centralising them on to fewer hospital sites. This is mainly because they want to save money or are having difficulties staffing services. However, the planned changes are frequently not implemented because of local public and/or clinical opposition. There are also examples of changes to services provided in the community. We could not find evidence that service reconfiguration would save significant amounts of money. There is also little evidence to help hospitals find ways of overcoming their staffing difficulties. More research is needed. We believe that the NHS would also benefit from retaining a national source of clinical advice to help guide service change.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its preceding programmes as project number 12/5001/59. The contractual start date was in October 2012. The final report began editorial review in January 2014 and was accepted for publication in July 2014. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health.

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