

Analysis of the profile, characteristics, patient experience and community value of community hospitals: a multimethod study

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Community hospitals are found across England, but there is no agreed definition of what a community hospital is, and little is known about patients' experiences of them or how they are supported and valued by local people. This study sought to address these knowledge gaps.

The research involved three phases. Data sets on health-care services were brought together to develop a list of community hospitals and identify key features. Nine case study hospitals were selected, and interviews and focus groups with staff ($n = 132$), patients ($n = 60$), carers ($n = 28$), volunteers ($n = 68$), local residents ($n = 74$) and managers and commissioners ($n = 9$) were conducted. Data from the Charity Commission on volunteering and income generated by community hospital League of Friends were analysed.

This study identified 296 community hospitals with beds in England. Typically, these were small (< 30 beds), in rural areas and led by doctors/general practitioners and nurses. They provide a range of services, mainly to older people.

People said that it felt different being a patient in a community hospital compared with elsewhere: it felt more like home because of its location and familiarity, environment and atmosphere, and the relationships between staff, patients, families and the community. People described a holistic and personalised approach to care, which was particularly valued as admission to hospital was often associated with difficult changes in personal circumstances.

Local people get involved in community hospitals through donations, volunteering and other support, which contributes to patient experience and staff morale; however, the money being raised by communities is declining and getting people actively involved can be difficult. Communities benefit from having a local hospital in ways that go beyond health care: they offer opportunities for employment and social interaction, as well as being a sign of vitality and reassurance.

Changes currently affecting community hospitals have the potential to undermine these positive experiences and values.

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