

Sense-making strategies and help-seeking behaviours associated with urgent care services: a mixed-methods study

Joanne Turnbull,^{1*} Gemma McKenna,¹ Jane Prichard,¹
Anne Rogers,² Robert Crouch,³ Andrew Lennon⁴
and Catherine Pope¹

¹School of Health Sciences, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

²National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) Wessex, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

³Emergency Department, University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust (UHS), Southampton, UK

⁴Southern Headquarters, South Central Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SCAS), Winchester, UK

*Corresponding author j.c.turnbull@soton.ac.uk

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

The aim of this study was to find out if service users (patients) shared similar views about urgent care to people who plan and organise services (such as policy-makers, NHS commissioners and managers). It also aimed to find out how and why service users decide to seek help from urgent care services. Understanding this could help those who run NHS urgent care services to organise them in ways that patients can more easily understand. To do this, policy and research papers (in a literature review) were examined, service users were interviewed and group discussions were carried out.

It was found that service users make sense of urgent care services and decide to use them by doing three different types of tasks and activities (which have been called 'work'). The first is the work that people do to decide how serious their symptoms are and what action to take. The second is the work that people do to decide if their symptoms justify using health services (e.g. service users often worry about 'wasting the time' of health services). The third type of work describes the choices people make about which service to use (e.g. what is available and how convenient it is). Deciding to use urgent care services involves weighing up decisions about these different types of work. For example, a patient may wish to avoid 'using a particular service unnecessarily', but this may be balanced against what is most accessible or convenient at a particular time of day. It is concluded that service users' views about urgent care services are sometimes different from those of the people who plan and organise services. It is proposed that the term 'urgent care' should be clearer to patients. Those who provide urgent care should recognise the work that patients do in choosing and using urgent care services.

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