

Increasing specialist intensity at weekends to improve outcomes for patients undergoing emergency hospital admission: the HiSLAC two-phase mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

The HiSLAC two-phase mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

We have known for 20 years that patients admitted to hospitals at weekends have a slightly higher risk of dying than those admitted during the week (the 'weekend effect'). The cause was thought to be too few doctors in the hospital at weekends, making health care less reliable, but there was no evidence to prove this. There was, however, agreement that access to health care at weekends needed to improve. Therefore, NHS England launched a policy called '7-day services', which included standards that required hospital specialists (consultants) to be more closely involved in caring for patients admitted as emergencies every day of the week, including weekends.

We wanted to know whether or not this policy would improve care and minimise the weekend effect. We assembled a team of researchers, doctors and patients, and all acute hospitals in England. We surveyed specialists about their working patterns; interviewed hospital staff and patients about their experiences; looked at whether or not introducing more specialists was value for money; and studied national trends, including how many patients died in hospital or shortly after discharge.

Our research shows that the weekend effect is not linked to specialist availability. Patients admitted at weekends are sicker, more frail and less likely to have been referred to hospital by their general practitioner. These findings have worsened over the last 5 years. By contrast, the quality of care in hospital is actually slightly better at weekends than on weekdays and has improved with time. There are now more specialists in hospital at weekends and on weekdays, but this has been outstripped by the rise in emergency admissions. Increasing the number of specialists may be cost-effective, not by preventing the weekend effect but by promoting earlier discharge of patients from hospital.

The 'weekend effect' may be related to what happens to people in the community before hospital admission. This needs further investigation.

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