

Evaluation of different models of general practitioners working in or alongside emergency departments: a mixed-methods realist evaluation

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

Hospital emergency departments are under huge pressure. Patients are waiting many hours to be seen, some with problems that general practitioners could deal with. To reduce waiting times and improve patient care, arrangements have been put in place for general practitioners to work in or alongside emergency departments (general practitioner–emergency department models). We studied the different ways of working to find out what works well, how and for whom.

We brought together a lot of information. We reviewed existing evidence, sent out surveys to 184 emergency departments, spent time in the emergency departments observing how they operated and interviewing 106 staff in 13 hospitals and 24 patients who visited those emergency departments. We also looked at statistical information recorded by hospitals. Two public contributors were involved from the beginning, and we held two stakeholder events to ensure the relevance of our research to professionals and patients.

Getting reliable figures to compare the various general practitioner–emergency department set-ups (inside, parallel to or outside the emergency department) was difficult. Our findings suggest that over time more people are coming to emergency departments and overall waiting times did not generally improve due to general practitioner–emergency department models. Evidence that general practitioners might admit fewer patients to hospital was mixed, with limited findings of cost savings. Patients were generally supportive of the care they received, although we could not speak to as many patients as we planned. The skills and experience of general practitioners were often valued as members of the wider emergency department team. We identified how the care provided was kept safe with: strong leaders, good communication between different types of staff, highly trained and experienced nurses responsible for streaming and specific training for general practitioners on how they were expected to work.

We have produced a guide to help professionals develop and improve general practitioner–emergency department services and we have written easy-to-read summaries of all the articles we published.

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