

# Harnessing the power of language to enhance patient experience of the NHS complaint journey in Northern Ireland: a mixed-methods study

Catrin S Rhys,<sup>1\*</sup> Bethan Benwell,<sup>2</sup>  
Maria Erofeeva<sup>1</sup> and Richard Simmons<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ulster University, Belfast, UK

<sup>2</sup>University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

\*Corresponding author [cs.rhys@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:cs.rhys@ulster.ac.uk)

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

Published September 2024

DOI: 10.3310/NRGA3207

## Plain language summary

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Health and Social Care Delivery Research 2024; Vol. 12: No. 33

DOI: 10.3310/NRGA3207

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## Plain language summary

The aim of this project was to make the experience of complaining to the National Health Service better for patients and their families and improve the outcomes for the National Health Service. Complaints can be positive for the National Health Service because they help improve services for other patients. However, if a complaint escalates, it could be costly for the National Health Service and stressful for the patient.

We analysed phone calls and letters between the National Health Service and patients or their family. Some patients took part in the study over a long period of time: from when their complaint was lodged until it was complete. We also used online diaries and interviews to analyse how this communication affected the hopes and expectations of the patient throughout the complaints journey.

Our research found that people making complaints have particular needs: to be listened to, to tell their whole story (including how the bad experience has impacted on their lives), to be treated as reasonable and for their complaint to be taken seriously. If they feel that these needs are not being met, the complaint often becomes more serious; the patient may even talk about pursuing legal action. We observed that call handlers can use communication skills to ensure that patients feel listened to and taken seriously when they make a complaint. We also found that receiving written responses to their complaint (often at the end of the complaint journey) is when patients feel most dissatisfied. We identified which responses to a complaint are viewed negatively (avoiding blame, insincere apologies) and which are viewed positively (accepting responsibility, recognising the impact of the events).

Our findings were then used to develop training materials using real examples from our data. This will help complaint handlers reflect on how their communication impacts on patients making complaints and will lead to a better experience of the complaints process.

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ISSN 2755-0079 (Online)

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This journal was previously published as *Health Services and Delivery Research* (Volumes 1–9); ISSN 2050-4349 (print), ISSN 2050-4357 (online)

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## This article

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HSDR programme or one of its preceding programmes as award number NIHR127367. The contractual start date was in August 2019. The draft manuscript began editorial review in July 2023 and was accepted for publication in March 2024. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HSDR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' manuscript and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this article.

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