**Experiences of Gypsies and Travellers in primary care: GP services**

Sarah Sweeney and Rosie Stanbury | July 2019

In the 2017/8 GP Patient Survey, Gypsy and Irish Traveller patients were among the least likely to report a positive experience of their GP service[[1]](#footnote-1). We interviewed forty members of Gypsy and Traveller communities to develop a more nuanced understanding of what is working and what needs to be addressed in order to improve Gypsy and Traveller patient experience of GP services. We asked participants about their experience with registering, making appointments, perceptions of how well medical concepts are explained and have made recommendations to improve Gypsy and Traveller patient experience in GP services.

**Key findings**

* Almost half of patients we spoke to from Gypsy and Traveller communities reported difficulties in registering at a GP.
* Over one third of patients we spoke to from Gypsy and Traveller communities reported difficulties in getting an appointment.
* Over one third of patients we spoke to from Gypsy and Traveller communities reported that they found information from their GP difficult to understand.
* A number of respondents reported that they felt discrimination meant that they received poorer treatment from their GP.

**Context**

Gypsy and Traveller communities are known to face some of the most severe health inequalities and poor life outcomes amongst the United Kingdom population, even when compared with other groups experiencing exclusion, and with other ethnic minorities[[2]](#footnote-2). Gypsies and Travellers are estimated to have life expectancies of between ten and 25 years shorter than the general population and experience six less Quality Adjusted Life Years (that is, years spent in good health) before life expectancy is taken into account[[3]](#footnote-3)[[4]](#footnote-4)[[5]](#footnote-5). Data from the 2011 Census found that in England and Wales, Gypsies and Travellers had the lowest proportion of people rating their general health as ‘good’ or 'very good' at 70 per cent compared to 81 per cent overall[[6]](#footnote-6).

The reasons behind the poor health of Gypsy and Traveller communities are multiple and complex. Without doubt, chronic exclusion and inequalities across the wider social determinants of health are key factors putting Gypsy and Traveller communities at risk of poor health. However, failure on the part of the health and social care system to make a proportionate response to address these risk factors mean that little progress has been made in improving the health of Gypsy and Traveller communities in recent years.

In the 2017/8 GP Patient Survey, Gypsy and Irish Traveller patients were among the least likely to report a positive experience of their GP services (72.9% compared to 83.8% of the general population)[[7]](#footnote-7). However, it is important to keep in mind that the real figure may be even worse as invites to the GP Patient Survey are only sent to people who are registered at a GP practice and are sent by post, so this may automatically exclude nomadic members of Gypsy and Traveller communities who experience some of the greatest challenges in accessing and benefitting from primary care.

Previous research on the experiences of Gypsy and Traveller communities within primary care have often focussed on issues around registration. While we touch on this in this piece of research, we go beyond registration to explore Gypsy and Traveller experiences of making appointments and perceptions on how well medical concepts are explained.

As an organisation, when we speak to our service users about their experiences of healthcare and the NHS, we generally hear that our service users hold the NHS in high regard and are greatly appreciative of the safety and support it brings to their lives. In this report, we aim to highlight both what is working well and issues which need to be addressed to improve Gypsy and Traveller patient experience in GP services.

**Registration**

The NHS England Patient Registration Standard Operating Principles for Primary Medical Care says, “When applying to become a patient there is no regulatory requirement to prove identity, address, immigration status or the provision of an NHS number in order to register”. However, we regularly hear from Gypsy and Traveller service users who have been refused registration at a doctor’s surgery because they have no proof of identification or because they have no address. To ascertain the extent to which this is an issue in general practices in England, we carried out a mystery shopping exercise with 50 doctor’s surgeries in December 2018 and January 2019[[8]](#footnote-8). We found that:

* 24 out of 50 GP practices we contacted in England would not register our mystery shopper.
* Despite this, every GP practice was rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by the Care Quality Commission for their work with ‘People whose circumstances may make them vulnerable’.
* GP practices were significantly more likely to refuse to register our mystery shopper in urban areas compared to rural areas.
* GP practices were significantly more likely to refuse to register our mystery shopper in areas where there are large Gypsy and Traveller populations compared to where there are not.

Unsurprisingly, in our interviews with members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities as part of this piece of research, almost half of participants highlighted challenges they have experienced in registering. Difficulties in registering were reported almost exclusively by those who are travelling or who have travelled. The main reason people had difficulty registering was when a GP service would not register them without proof of a fixed address. We heard:

* *“Thing is, I have had problems in the past. You see because you need an address and when you're travelling you can't give one. There will be two, three people behind you when you wait and they [the reception staff] will talk to them first because they have an address and are easier.”*
* *“I had to show my address and have ID for it. They said that a caravan didn't count as a home address. They told us to just go to Morley Street because they was used to dealing with us Travellers.”*
* *“Due to no fixed address I've been turned away from multiple doctors, even though I've explained NHS policy, the surgery just either gave me a blank look or just said it’s their policy.”*
* *“Surgeries say that they are full and that we are not from their area. If you can get in then you have to fill in forms which is difficult when you are unable to read and write, especially when the surgery is busy and you are being rushed.”*

However, some of the feedback we heard was very positive. We heard:

* *“I’ve been at the same one my whole life.”*
* *“I’ve had no problems registering with GP surgeries in Kent or London. Dorset was the best, they made appointments for the whole family to do health checks which picked up on health issues that needed attention in secondary health care.”*
* *“I've been at the same one my Mum set me up with since I was little.”*
* *“I've been at the same one for years.”*

**Appointments**

In the GP Patient Survey 2017/8, 62% of Gypsy and Traveller respondents describe their experience of making an appointment at their GP as being “very good” or “fairly good” compared to 69% of the general population[[9]](#footnote-9). 11% of Gypsy and Traveller respondents describe their experience of making an appointment at their GP as being “very poor” compared to 5% of the general population[[10]](#footnote-10).

**Table 1: Breakdown of Gypsy and Traveller patients’ experience of booking appointments, GP Patient Survey 2017/8[[11]](#footnote-11)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very good | Fairly good | Neither good nor poor | Fairly poor | Very poor |
| Gypsy or Irish Traveller population | 27% | 35% | 18% | 10% | 11% |
| General population | 30% | 39% | 16% | 10% | 5% |

When we asked if participants had ever experienced a problem with getting an appointment at their GP, we heard that 15 had. A number of patients reported that they felt it needed to be an emergency before they were seen. A number of patients also said that demand for appointments far outstripped the supply. Two patients felt that anti-Gypsy/Traveller discrimination had a role to play in their difficulties getting appointments. Amongst the responses we received, we heard:

* *“My sister normally sorts them out for me. They put me on hold and I can't take it.”*
* *“Because I'm a Traveller they tell me that they're always busy. I had a problem recently, a urine problem and someone that called up after me got an appointment first even though I was quite ill.”*
* *“They have long waiting times. But when I tell them that I am asthmatic there are suddenly appointments.”*
* *“There are constantly no available appointments. I have a heart problem and they keep cancelling appointments even though I feel I really need to see someone and when you do it is never the same person, and I don't really like telling all my problems with my health to everyone.”*
* *“I ran out of calling credit before the phone was answered. Also it was hard getting registered as a young person because I did not want to use my parents address for personal reasons.”*
* *“When I was travelling it was difficult to get an appointment with someone local to me rather than having to go back near my base to see a doctor. GPs can see patients on a one off basis but aren't always keen.”*
* *“They always say the appointments are gone at 8:05, go to walk in or A & E. Lines only open at 8.”*
* *“Too many patients, not enough doctors.”*
* *“As a temporary patient while away it's hard to get seen.”*

**Communication**

It is important for patients to feel listened to during appointments and to understand the information and advice their GP gives them. Results from the GP Patient Survey 2017/8 reveal some disparities between Gypsy and Traveller patients’ and the general population’s perception of how good healthcare professionals are giving them enough time and in listening to them[[12]](#footnote-12).

**Table 2: Breakdown of Gypsy and Traveller patients’ perception of how good healthcare professionals were at their last appointment at giving them enough time, GP Patient Survey 2017/8[[13]](#footnote-13)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very good | Good | Neither good nor poor | Poor | Very poor | Doesn’t apply |
| General population | 50% | 37% | 9% | 2% | 1% | 1% |
| Gypsy and Traveller population | 41% | 38% | 14% | 5% | 1% | 1% |

**Table 3: Breakdown of Gypsy and Traveller patients’ perceptions of how good the healthcare professional at their last appointment was at listening to them, GP Patient Survey 2017/8[[14]](#footnote-14)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very good | Good | Neither good nor poor | Poor | Very poor | Doesn’t apply |
| General population | 54% | 35% | 7% | 2% | 1% | 1% |
| Gypsy and Traveller population | 48% | 36% | 8% | 5% | 2% | 1% |

As part of our research, we asked respondents how easy the information from their GP was to understand. Over one third of respondents reported that they found information from their GP difficult to understand. Both good and bad experiences were reported:

* *“They are big words to understand and they don't really explain it, they just tell you.”*
* *“Sometimes, I take my niece with me because she understands them.”*
* *“Some of them can be very ignorant, they will just give me some paper and don't understand that I can't read none of it.”*
* *“Doctors need to speak louder and in a way that we understand. It is difficult to understand some of the medical terms.”*
* *“Big words make it hard to get what's going on. I always come out confused.”*
* *“I can't read or write. I want to learn, I went to the hospital to try and learn and they just laughed.”*
* *“My doctor is quite good, some doctors make you feel thick but he takes his time. The junior doctors roll their eyes.”*
* *“I go to the one same doctor and have done for years. I understand him because I'm used to him and the way he talks, and he's used to me and what I understand. My daughter fills out any paper work for me because I can't read that good.”*
* *“It's the newer younger doctors that are the problem. The older ones know me and they talk to me properly, the younger ones tell you, you say that you don't understand and they just brush you off.”*
* *“Yes they use long words and when you ask what they mean you get looked at like you're silly.”*

**Equality and inclusion**

Throughout our research, we heard on a number of occasions from patients who felt they were receiving poorer treatment because they were Travellers or felt that their GP hadn’t fully understood their way of life. As mentioned previously, a number of patients felt that it was harder for them to get appointments because of discrimination. When speaking about issues with registration, one participant said, “*They're just racist aren't they? Sorry to be blunt”*.

Discrimination against Gypsy and Traveller communities is widely noted as the last ‘acceptable’ form of racism. In 2018, the Equality and Human Rights Commission carried out a ‘social barometer’ test with over 2000 members of the British public and found that 44% expressed overt prejudice towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals. This was the most by a significant margin out of all protected groups[[15]](#footnote-15). It is essential that in public services, this is taken seriously and mitigated against.

Also in our research, we found some instances in which people felt their way of life hadn’t been fully understood. For example, one respondent said, “*Yes, I guess it has been O.K. I don't know if it is relevant but I live in a truck and sometimes they would advise things which just weren't feasible without a house”.* It is essential that health professionals feel confident and equipped to support members of Gypsy and Traveller communities with their health and care.

**Summary**

Overall, we heard from the 40 participants in our research that the NHS is a highly respected and appreciated institution. There was a general consensus that it brings great security and support into the lives of many people from Gypsy and Traveller communities. We heard of the important role of GP services in acting as the frontline of the health service and heard from many members of Gypsy and Traveller communities that their GP service was friendly, welcoming and inclusive.

However, we also heard from a number of patients who were having difficulties registering at a GP, getting an appointment or understanding the advice and information their GP was giving to them. We also heard from some respondents that they felt they were receiving a poorer service in GP services because of their ethnicity.

We have made a series of recommendations to address the issues outlined in this report:

* NHS England should carry out targeted participation work to gather data on the experiences of unregistered patients and patients with no fixed address, in recognition that the GP Patient Survey automatically excludes these groups.
* Both clinical and non-clinical staff working at GP services should have rigorous training on communicating advice and information to patients in simple and easy-to-understand ways, building upon the work of the Accessible Information Standard.
* The Department for Health and Social Care should commission mystery shopping of GP services to assess registration issues for Inclusion Health groups and share findings with the Care Quality Commission so that this can be considered in inspections.
* NHS England should ensure GP services are equipped and resourced to offer timely appointments to their patients, whilst ensuring this does not lead to an unfair workload for staff members in GP services.

**About us**

Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) is a leading national charity that works on behalf of all Gypsies, Roma and Travellers regardless of ethnicity, culture or background. FFT is a member of the [VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance](https://www.england.nhs.uk/hwalliance/) which is a partnership between the voluntary sector and the health and care system to provide a voice and improve the health and wellbeing for all communities.

fft@gypsy-traveller.org | www.gypsy-traveller.org | Twitter: @GypsyTravellers | Facebook: @FriendsFamiliesandTravellers | +44 (0) 1273 234 777

1. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/patient-experiences/patient-experience-of-primary-care-gp-services/latest [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Parry et al (2007) ‘Health status of Gypsies and Travellers in England’. J Epidemiol Community Health. 2007 Mar; 61(3): 198–204. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/gypsies-and-travellers-simple-solutions-living-together [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://leedsgate.co.uk/sites/default/files/media/BaselineCensus.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See footnote 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/whatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyoririshtravellersinenglandandwales/2014-01-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/patient-experiences/patient-experience-of-primary-care-gp-services/latest [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/No-room-at-the-inn-findings-from-mystery-shopping-GP-practices.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/analysistool?nationaldata=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/analysistool?nationaldata=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/analysistool?nationaldata=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/national-barometer-of-prejudice-and-discrimination-in-britain.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-15)