

Letter:**Why do patients leave our practice? A qualitative investigation into the reasons contributing to patients' decisions to leave a multi-partner general practice**

To the Editor: Doctors in private practice have by and large been uncertain as to the reasons why often their most loyal patients are the ones that leave them to attend another practice. Studies abound on the determinants of patient satisfaction in specific areas of general practitioner (GP) practice,¹ but very little research has been conducted on the key determinants which cause a patient to leave a GP practice.

What are patients' reasons for leaving their GP and the medical practice? This study attempts to identify the predominant factors which may cause a patient to leave a multi-partner general practice in Durban, South Africa, and to ascertain the critical event precipitating the final decision to leave. Factors which are amenable to change are identified, thereby serving to potentially reduce the overall incidence of the loss of patients.

A qualitative questionnaire was developed covering the seven identifiable categories of general practice care including inter alia the practice set-up and environment; the medical practice personnel; the quality of services rendered and the costs associated therewith. Each category was subdivided into specific areas with patients being required to list their agreement or disagreement with a particular statement pertaining to the target area. The confidential questionnaire was tested on a pilot project group of 50 dormant patients in April 2007. The questionnaire survey was then sent to 1 004 patients. All but four patients were randomly selected from practice files that had been dormant for three years or longer. The additional four patients, known to have left the practice due to negative experiences, were added following the random selection.

Only 103 completed questionnaires were returned. Of these, 44 patients had not left the practice but had been well for the past three years. Twenty seven patients had left the practice because they lived too far away. Seventeen patients had never been regular patients of the

practice, and had used it only in cases of emergency. Five patients were not unhappy with the practice but they could not afford the consultation fees and had to use the public health system. Ten patients admitted to being unhappy with the practice and to having moved to a different medical practice. The ten unhappy patients named factors such as long consultation waiting times, interpersonal difficulties with the doctor and/or the practice support staff, and financial issues as the reasons culminating in the decision to leave the practice.

The findings of this research show that while patients may become dissatisfied with various aspects of their experience at the practice, they are often galvanised into actually leaving the practice after a precipitating event takes place.² This event is very often related to an interpersonal issue with the doctor or the doctor's support staff. Relational issues and long waiting times at the practice are potentially modifiable. It should be borne in mind that patients do not always communicate their true reasons for dissatisfaction with the practice.

^aWessels JJ, MBChB, MFamMed

^bViljoen W, MBChB, MFamMed

^aPrivate Practitioner, Durban

^bDepartment of Family Medicine and Primary Care, University of Stellenbosch

Correspondence to: Dr Johannes Wessels, e-mail: tlw@law.co.za

References

1. Grol R, Wensing M, Mainz J, Jung HP, Ferreira P, Hearnshaw H, et al. Patients in Europe evaluate general practice care: an international comparison. *Br J Gen Pract* 2000;50(460):882-887.
2. Gandhi IG, Parle JV, Greenfield SM, Gould S. A qualitative investigation into why patients change their GP. *Family Practice* 1997;14:49-57.

ANNOUNCEMENT: Three new Family Medicine HODs

Recently three departments of Family Medicine in the country had the appointments of their new chairs/heads of department confirmed namely:

1. Prof Jannie Hugo – University of Pretoria
2. Prof Bob Mash – University of Stellenbosch
3. Prof Gboyega Ogunbanjo – University of Limpopo (Medunsa Campus)

The South African family medicine community wishes them successful tenures of office in their new appointments.

Ons benodig dringend 'n assistent / locum vir 'n besige praktyk in Vereeniging, vanaf Julie 2009 tot Januarie 2010. Salaris pakket kan met Dr Therine Rademan bespreek word.

Vir verdere inligting skakel asb. Dr Therine Rademan by 016-4220170 of 083 655 3459.