
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Ed Smith
[via email]

20 February 2017

Dear Ed

Since the start of 2017 there have been two occurrences^{1,2} of leaks of Accident and Emergency attendance data. These data are sourced from management information collected by NHS Improvement³ to enable it to support local NHS organisations during the pressures faced during the winter months.

I have been considering these leaks in the wider context of the Official Statistics published on NHS performance each month by NHS England⁴. Leaks of management information represent a disorderly release of data on Accident and Emergency attendance, and this could undermine the public's assessment of trustworthiness in the Official Statistics. It also creates a confused picture, with various sources of information over different time frames describing the accident and emergency performance for the same period in incomplete and inconsistent ways. I know you share these concerns and I am sure your organisation will undertake the appropriate reviews of how this management information is used and shared.

I also consider that the timing of the Official Statistics on Accident and Emergency attendance could be improved to reduce the exposure to the risk of leaks. The decision to follow Sir Bruce Keogh's⁵ recommendation to publish all performance-related publications on the same day, to help create a single coherent picture of performance each month, is sensible. It has however meant that since 2015 the Official Statistics on Accident and Emergency attendance are published monthly rather than weekly, and further lagged to keep in line with the time period available for other NHS performance indicators. A 6 week lag has thus been created between collection and publication of Accident and Emergency attendance statistics⁶.

This 6 week lag leaves the system vulnerable to leaks because management information circulates around the NHS system for operational purposes well in advance of the publication of the statistics. This issue is especially pertinent in the winter months, where, given the increased pressures that the system faces, there is considerable public interest in NHS performance and understandably an increased number of management information reports used within the NHS to help manage these pressures.

Given the importance of maintaining trust in statistics and maximising the value of these statistics, I invite you to work with your partners to review the timeliness of the Official Statistics regarding performance indicators to determine how you could reduce the time lag in publication whilst maintaining and developing further a coherent narrative. I would be grateful if you could update me on your thinking by the end of April.

¹ 10 January 2017: www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-38570960

² 9 February 2017: www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-38907492

³ www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/winter-daily-sitreps/

⁴ www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/ae-waiting-times-and-activity/

⁵ www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/letter-waiting-time-standards-sbk.pdf

⁶ www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2012/04/12-month-provisional-plan-for-2016-17-20-January-2017.pdf

I am writing in the same terms to Sir Malcolm Grant, Chair of NHS England; and Noel Gordon, Chair of NHS Digital. I have also copied this letter to Chris Wormald, Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ed Humpherson