Dear sir / Madam,

Subject: Advance Access for patients - a practice manager questionnaire

Access to health care is a universal marker of quality of health care provision. In the UK a variety of appointment systems are used to manage patient access to primary health care. Government regulations have been introduced to improve patient access, the full implications of which are unknown and are under review.

Our study concerned a primary health care setting in Northern Ireland, where no published research exists since the introduction of these regulations. The study surveyed practice managers who have a central role in patient access management. The high response rate and issues raised from the study make this a valuable contribution to patient access in the region and throughout the UK.

The paper concluded that GPs have been able to adjust to this government target by making changes to appointment systems and practice managers have been satisfied with its introduction. The authors feel that this is an important positive outcome from government investment in primary care. Factors relating to flexible appointment booking, receptionists' training and the development of the primary care nursing role were issues highlighted. The data should contribute to the widening and continuing debate throughout the United Kingdom about the ease and speed of patient access to primary care, and the effect this might have on the rest of the NHS.

Dr James Meade
Principal researcher