

# **The impact of incentives on the behaviour and performance of primary care professionals**

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*Report for the National Institute for Health  
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# *The Report*

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## 1 Outline of the report

### **1.1 Introduction**

There has been a general trend over the last 15 years to treat incentives in UK public services more explicitly<sup>1</sup>. These initiatives reflect a general shift away from placing implicit trust in individuals and organisations to carry out their duties, towards actively managing their performance<sup>2</sup>.

Understanding the impact of different types of incentives on professional behaviour in primary care has been recognised as an urgent need<sup>3</sup> in a context where major changes to incentive structures have been introduced in recent years, including new contractual incentives for the provision of services in primary care. Primary care professionals (PCPs) are also influenced by other policies, which alter incentives structures, such as those associated with developing practice-based commissioning (PBC) and working within wider care strategies in local health economies. It is important to understand the relative impact of incentives, or incentive mixes, in the NHS in order to enable commissioners (Primary Care Trusts or PCTs) to employ an effective repertoire of contractual and non-contractual incentives to influence change.

This report details the methods and findings of a three year National Institute of Health Research Service Delivery and Organisation programme funded project into the impact of incentives on the behaviour and performance of PCPs in the NHS

### **1.2 Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim of the project was to explore and explain the impact of incentives in primary care on professional behaviours and performance. Specifically we sought to:

- identify and classify the factors impacting on the motivation of PCPs
- examine the extent to which and the ways in which these are present in the various contexts in which PCPs are working

- explore how these impact on behaviours and performance of PCPs in general practice, dentistry and pharmacy settings
- describe local contextual factors which may encourage or limit responses to incentives
- investigate the ways in which incentive structures and regimes and their associated impacts evolve and transform over time
- analyse the (longitudinal) relationships between changes in incentive structures and the performance and behaviours of PCPs

### **1.3 Research design and project overview**

We adopted a multi-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative components. In order to capture the breadth of any associations between changes to incentive structures and their impacts, we conducted quantitative analyses using national datasets. To capture depth, we conducted interviews with PCPs and their staff, NHS commissioners, patients and independent sector providers of care.

The primary care settings covered by the project are

- General medical practice
- Community pharmacy
- General dental practice

The intention was to recruit research participants in a small number of health economies and follow these over time. However, difficulties in recruiting resulted in a change of research design. Instead, a more opportunistic approach was taken, which resulted in most participants being interviewed only once and participants being recruited from a much greater number of health economies (n=24) than the 4 originally planned. Rather than comparing responses of the same individuals over time, we have interpreted interview data in the context of changes over time in response to incentive structures and to changes in the wider health service more generally.

The overarching philosophy underpinning the approach was one of Realistic Evaluation<sup>4</sup> in which we assume that responses to incentives are not simply a product of the design of incentive structures, but are intimately connected to the context in which they occur.







































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































