Relational continuity in primary and secondary care in the Catalan national health system

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Background

Patient-doctor relational continuity has been neglected by recent policy in different countries, although argued to be very relevant in the context of increasingly fragmented and depersonalized healthcare services. The aim is to analyze relational continuity with the GP and the specialist and its influencing factors from the viewpoint of users of the Catalan national health system (Spain).

Methods

A descriptive, qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with patients (49) attended to in three healthcare areas with different service management models. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. A thematic content analysis was conducted segmented by study area with a mixed generation of categories and triangulation of analysts.
Results
Patients across the three healthcare areas studied generally perceive that consistency of personnel in primary care exists given that they are usually seen by the same GP over longer periods of time and rarely by locum doctors. Patients of all areas indicate inconsistencies of specialists but do not consider that to be problematic. Patients who perceive consistency of primary and secondary care personnel generally describe that they have established an ongoing relationship characterised by mutual accumulated knowledge and personal trust. Consistency of personnel is perceived to depend on organizational factors (appointment making system and size of primary care centre); whilst an ongoing relationship is developed when stability of personnel, frequency of visits and a combination of factors related to physicians (technical quality, patient-physician communication and commitment to patient care) are present.

Conclusions
Perceptions of the existence of relational continuity are similar in the selected healthcare areas; however differ depending on the care level. Various factors related to the organization and physicians must coexist to be able to establish an ongoing relationship.

Key message:
- Different organizational factors influence consistency of personnel; which—together with various factors related to physicians—is a prerequisite for creating an ongoing relationship based on trust