

Do patients think their general practitioner cares?

Marjan Kljakovic

Correspondence to: marjan.kljakovic@anu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Aim

To compare attitudes in Australia and New Zealand on whether people thought their GP cared.

Method

Four survey polls taken from people registered in Facebook from around the world, New Zealand, and Australia.

Results

Among the 3000 people polled, 87% were aged 18 to 34 years and 50% were male. Fifty-eight per cent of New Zealand and 52% of Australian people thought their GP cared. Fewer people from New Zealand (15%) than Australia (21%) claimed they had been to a GP who did not care ($p=0.0141$). Seven per cent of New Zealand and Australian people had never been to a GP.

Conclusion

Most people had experienced a GP who cared, but about a fifth of people had the experience of a GP who did not care. This experience was more likely to occur in Australia than in New Zealand.

Keywords

Caring general practice, general practitioner

(NZFP 2008; 35: 187–190)

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Introduction

The literature is replete with stories about caring relationships general practitioners (GPs) have with patients, their kin, or friends.^{1,2} The literature

Marjan Kljakovic has worked part-time in Australian general practice for three years, and previously worked part-time in New Zealand general practice for 18 years. As a GP academic, he encounters many people who want to comment on the nature of general practice. A frequent theme people wish to explore is their experience of the caring GP. It has been his observation that more people in Australia have said they could not find a caring GP than people in New Zealand. This study tests out that observation.



also reports on what it means to be a caring GP. Some describe it as a virtue,³ others as an oxymoron.⁴ In contrast, it is difficult to find reports on what people think of their GP's care, even though the literature describes people's perspective on friendship,^{5,6} trust,⁷ and empathy.^{8,9} Searching with the phrase 'caring doctor' or 'caring general practitioner' produced 122 hits in PubMed, of which only seven reported patients' opinions on the 'caring GP',^{10–16} and 377 hits in Google™, of which only four reported people's opinions.^{17–20} All 11 opinions were incidental to the main aims of the studies. For example, in one study on the nature of personal care in general practice a patient said incidentally of her GP:

*'I think the main thing is that [the GP] has been there for me in the past...it's nice to know...that your GP's there...that he's really interested in what's happening with you... and caring about your health...'*¹⁰

Such anecdotes indicate that caring GPs matter to people, even though the evidence is thin. The aim of this survey is to compare attitudes in New Zealand and Australia on whether people think their GP cared.

Method

Survey polls

Facebook allows for survey polls of people. Facebook is a social utility accessible on the web through any browser. Over 30 million people from around the world register using a valid email address. Registration connects people with friends and others who work, study, and live around them. People use Facebook to share information with the people they meet. Facebook comprises networks corresponding to geographic regions.

In each poll, one question is posted to the home page of each online participant who can choose only one response from a list of five presented in random order. Consent is not requested as each poll is anonymous and no identifying information is collected. Facebook keeps each poll open until the desired sample size is obtained. Facebook presents the results of a poll in aggregated form by age and gender.

Three polls were taken of people from around the world by asking the generic question 'Does your xxx care for you?' where 'xxx' was replaced by the words *general practitioner (GP), doctor, or lawyer*. People could

choose one of the following responses in each poll.

- 'Yes my xxx cares for me'
- 'My xxx is ok, it's the other xxxs who don't care'
- 'I have been to a xxx and know they do not care'
- 'Who is a xxx?'
- 'I have never been to a xxx.'

One poll was taken of people from New Zealand and Australia who were asked the question 'Does your general practitioner (GP) care for you?' People could choose from one of the five responses listed above.

In the analysis, comparisons were made using parametric statistics where appropriate.

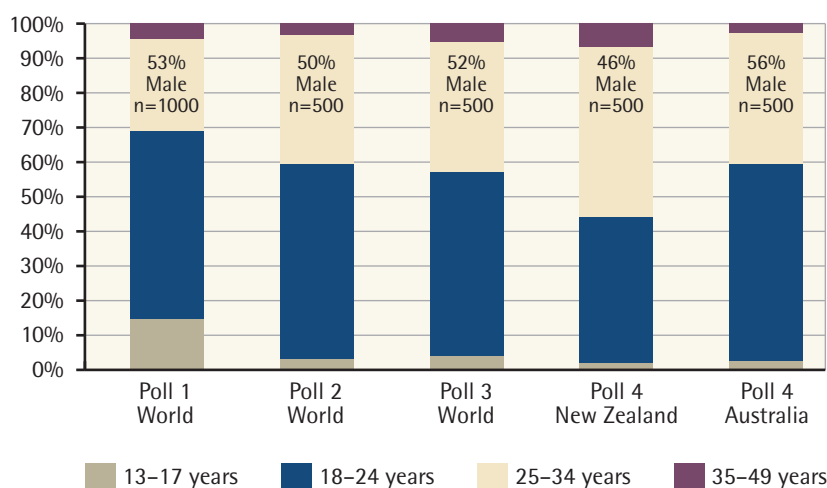
Results

Three thousand people responded to four polls taken of people logged onto Facebook in August 2007. Each poll took less than an hour to complete. Figure 1 shows that the age range of people was 13 to 49 years in all four polls and 87% of people were aged between 18 and 34 years. In poll 1, 14% of people were under 18 years compared to an average of 2% under 18 years in the other three polls. An average 50% of people were male (range 46% to 53%).

Validating the language

The responses to the first three polls were from 2000 people logged onto

Figure 1. Response by age groups to four polls of people registered online in Facebook from the World, New Zealand and Australia.



Facebook from any place in the world at the time of polling. Table 1 shows a significant difference in that more people did not know who a general practitioner was (27%), compared to people not knowing who a doctor (7%) or a lawyer (8%) was. Table 2 shows only a small proportion of people from both New Zealand (5%) and Australia (4%) did not know who a general practitioner was.

There were 1161 people from the first three polls indicating they had encountered a general practitioner, doctor, or lawyer. Table 1 shows fewer people would stipulate an experience of caring – 'Yes, my xxx cares for me'

– from a lawyer (13%) compared to a general practitioner (34%), or doctor (43%). Similarly fewer people would stipulate a more measured level of care – 'My xxx is OK, it's the other xxxs who do not care' – from a lawyer (10%) compared to a general practitioner (14%), or doctor (15%).

Perception of whether the GP cared

There were 720 people from poll 4 (72%) taken in New Zealand or Australia indicating that they had experience of a GP who cared. Table 2 shows that a similar proportion of people from New Zealand (58%) and Australia (52%) thought their GP

Table 1. Responses to three Facebook polls from around the world to the generic question "Does your xxx care for you? – where xxx refers to the words general practitioner, doctor, or lawyer. In each poll people could choose from one of the five responses (N=2000).

| Responses | Facebook | | | | | | | |
|---|--|-----|------------------------------|-----|------------------------------|-----|-------------|---------|
| | Poll 1 | | Poll 2 | | Poll 3 | | | |
| | xxx refers to 'general practitioner' | | xxx refers to 'doctor' | | xxx refers to 'lawyer' | | | |
| | n=1000 | | n=500 | | n=500 | | Chi-squared | P value |
| Yes, my xxx cares for me | 338 | 34% | 216 | 43% | 66 | 13% | 112.5 | 0.000 |
| My xxx is ok, it's the other xxxs who don't care | 142 | 14% | 76 | 15% | 29 | 6% | 26.2 | 0.000 |
| I have been to a xxx and know they do not care | 149 | 15% | 94 | 19% | 51 | 10% | 14.2 | 0.006 |
| Who is a xxx? | 270 | 27% | 34 | 7% | 30 | 8% | 85.1 | 0.000 |
| I have never been to a xxx | 101 | 10% | 80 | 16% | 316 | 63% | 632.8 | 0.000 |

Table 2. Responses to one Facebook poll in New Zealand and asking Australia the question "Does your general practitioner (GP) care for you?" People could choose from one of the five responses (N=1000).

| Responses | Facebook | | | | | | |
|--|-------------|-----|-----------|-----|------|-----------|---------|
| | New Zealand | | Australia | | | | |
| | n=500 | % | n=500 | % | OR | 95%CI | P value |
| Yes my GP cares for me | 290 | 58% | 261 | 52% | 1.26 | 0.98–1.64 | 0.0750 |
| My GP is ok, it's the other GPs who don't care | 78 | 16% | 91 | 18% | 0.83 | 0.39–1.17 | 0.3113 |
| I have been to a GP and know they do not care | 76 | 15% | 107 | 21% | 0.66 | 0.47–0.92 | 0.0141 |
| Who is a GP? | 25 | 5% | 20 | 4% | 1.26 | 0.67–2.40 | 0.5417 |
| I have never been to a GP | 31 | 6% | 21 | 4% | 1.51 | 0.83–2.76 | 0.1999 |

cared for them. Furthermore, a similar proportion of people from New Zealand (16%) and Australia (18%) thought their GP was OK, but it was the other GPs who did not care. Fewer people from New Zealand (15%) than Australia (21%) claimed they had been to a GP who did not care ($p=0.0141$).

Never been to a GP

There were 153 people from polls 1 and 4 who stated they had never been to a GP (7.7% of 2000 people from the world, New Zealand and Australia). There was no difference in the proportion of people under 25 years, but significantly more males (14%) than females (7%) (Chi squared = 37.66, $p=0.0001$) who stated they had never been to a GP.

Discussion

This study found that most people had experience of a GP who cared. However, 17% of people had the experience of a GP who did not care. This was more likely to occur in Australia than New Zealand.

About 8% of people in this study had never been to a GP and this was more likely among males than females. Prior research into consumer use of GPs found respondents were more likely to see more than one GP if they had more visits; were dissatisfied with their last consultation with a GP; were younger; were female; and were highly qualified.^{21,22}

This study provided face validity to the claim that the word 'care' is

more likely to be associated with an encounter with a medical than a legal person. People were also more likely to stipulate an experience of caring – 'Yes, my xxx cares for me' – from a doctor (43%) rather than a general practitioner (34%). However, there was no difference in stipulating a more measured level of care – 'My xxx is OK, it's the other xxxs who do not care' – from a doctor (15%) compared to a general practitioner (14%). Furthermore, people were more likely to know who a 'doctor' was than know who a 'general practitioner' was. Such difference may result from people not speaking English as their first language so they do not recognise the words 'general practitioner'. However, cultural influences are also likely to play a part.²³ People in North America, for example, are more likely to use the words 'family practitioner' or 'my doctor' than the words 'general practitioner'. In contrast, there was no difference in the use of the words 'general practitioner' among New Zealand and Australian peoples.

The differences in people's perception of the caring GP may also result from differing structural arrangements for care between countries.²⁴ In Australia there is largely a fee-for-service structure without registration of patients to particular GPs. In New Zealand there is a mixed system of both a capitation and a fee-for-service structure where people register with a particular GP for care,

but are free to choose other GPs for care. Consequently, as this study found, more people encounter a GP who did not care in Australia than in New Zealand.

The limitations of this study

A limitation of Facebook polls for general practice is that only one question can be asked at a time and the majority of people were young adults. This does not allow for complex analyses across different questions, nor does it capture the opinions of the very young and elderly people. However, the strength of using a polling method is that it gave a quick, non-threatening, response from people in a large community-based sample frame. It also allowed for an international comparative analysis of beliefs about general practice. More qualitative research is needed to identify other differences in the meaning of the sense and reference of the word 'care' for general practice. For example, this paper focused on the psychological aspects of caring. There are also service connotations when GPs provide care.

In conclusion, most people in New Zealand and Australia had experienced a GP who cared. About a fifth of people had experience of a GP who did not care. This experience was more likely to occur in Australia than in New Zealand.

Competing interests

None declared.

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