

PATIENT QUESTIONNAIRE
Replies and Analysis
August 2002

The questionnaire which is reproduced below together with patients' responses and my comments was initially conceived to try and find out what patients honestly felt about fees and to test the water about what we could/should charge. I then realised it would be quite a useful tool to educate patients about the reality of running a practice and to find out their views on a wider range of issues. Some additional questions were also included as a result of consultations with a number of colleagues. For example, the question about cancellation fees. Interestingly, I would never have thought to include this because I have so few cancellations each year. However, for another colleague, it was a real bugbear.

I sent 195 questionnaires out with a letter about the sabbatical which I had planned for the beginning of this year and a reply-paid envelope. I encouraged patients to return them anonymously if they wished (3 did so). The response rate was quite high totalling 69. i.e almost exactly one-third replied.

I had braced myself for quite a few adverse comments, especially regarding fees. Surprisingly, only one made my hackles rise because she objected to the £5 charge I sometimes made for typing an HSA insurance statement. What was really touching was the number of patients who said nice things. A few also included long letters of comment and discussion on the points raised. I think it would be a very interesting piece of research if any colleagues were to send the same questionnaire to their patients and see if the answers were similar.

Another question "Would you like remedies and consultations charged separately?" was put in to find out what patients thought even though very few of us would consider doing it (I presume). The answers were surprising!

Of the 9 patients who are also homeopaths who replied specifically to the covering letter about my sabbatical, (only) 3 returned their questionnaires because the questions were "too close" (I assume for them to answer objectively).

All my other therapist patients (counsellors, psychotherapists, acupuncturists etc) returned their questionnaires.

QUESTIONNAIRE

A group of my colleagues are conducting a review of our practice management. In the light of increased overheads as we bring homeopathy to a higher professional level we would be extremely grateful if you could spare a few extra minutes to let us have your views on any of these questions which are relevant to you.

As 'alternative medicine' practitioners we realise we cannot make the same charges as the more orthodox professions such as doctors in private practice, solicitors and accountants. Indeed, we are committed to doing our best to provide treatment for anyone who needs it, regardless of their financial status. However, the reality is that very few homeopaths earn a viable income; a homeopath who earns £10,000 a year is considered to be very successful and most earn considerably less. There is an ongoing debate about this within our profession but we realise that we do not know our patients' views because, until now, we have not asked you. In addition to the questions below we would be especially grateful if you could add any extra opinions you may have. At the end of the questionnaire we have added a few facts which might help to explain why we need to review our business management.

* The fee you pay covers consultation time, research, your prescription, and phone support if needed. Do you consider this is good value/too expensive/too cheap?

52 said good value
2 said too expensive
16 did not reply

* *What is the maximum you would be prepared to pay for
a) the long first consultation? (£40-£100)*

25 said £50
13 said £40
16 said £60
14 offered between £75 and £100
1 offered only £35

It seems that £50ish is about right

b) *follow-up consultations? (£25-£75)*

23 said £30
19 said £25
21 said £35
14 said £40
4 offered £50
1 offered £75

It seems that £30-£35 is very acceptable

Some were inconclusive about fees, ie vague amounts. Others said it would depend on how desperate they were.

Others added extra sheets or discussed pro's and con's of fees. Some people said "hook" people with low first fee (£40) then only offered £25 for follow-ups. Huh!

Some discussed variable rates for home visits or shorter times. Strikingly, there was no correlation between those who put low fees but didn't necessarily say the fees they paid affected their ability to see me. Maybe it's because I let people pay what they can afford??

* *Do the fees you have to pay affect your ability to see your homeopath as often as you would like to?*

25 said yes
31 said no
9 said sometimes

So about 50 : 50

* *Would you like to have shorter, cheaper consultations? (How long and how much?)*

32 said no
4 said yes
17 were not sure or didn't answer
18 gave examples of time and cost:
approx 15 minutes for £15-£20 (5)
approx 30 minutes for £15-£35 (a few for each amount)
Only 1 suggested childrens' rates at half price for 20-30 minutes
I used the Acute Helpline 3-4 times p.a. to provide it
I appreciated the £5-£10 charge for short phone consultations

Conclusion : perhaps we should invite patients to choose the length of time they think they will need



* *Would you like/have liked more frequent follow-up appointments in the first months of treatment? (How often?)*

44 said no

3 said yes

1 said weekly and 4 said 2-weekly (but cost would be a problem)

8 didn't reply (=no?)

Several commented on trusting the homoeopath to advise the best timing for them. Another suggested that the frequency of appointments should be discussed. Some specially valued phone support.

Broadly we seem to get this right but there is still scope for discussion on an individual basis with patients.

* *Would you like consultation time and remedies to be charged separately so that you pay less if only a few pills are prescribed?*

32 said no

24 said yes

with 9 being not sure or possibly yes

3 gave no reply

one loved the fact that pills were cheap and therefore freely available to all, but also recognised professional costs for consultation

one said "The consultation is as valuable as the pills"! (Surely we would think it is more so?)

These replies surprised me but maybe they shouldn't have. Does it demonstrate that our patients are divided equally as to whether the pills or the consultation are the most valuable?

* *Do you think children, pensioners and people on benefits should be offered special rates? Or, do you think it is fairer that your homeopath has one fixed rate for everyone but asks you to give what you can afford if it is too expensive?*

25 elected for special rates

25 elected for fixed rates with discretion

10 said "fixed rates" specifically (but this may be with discretion)

9 debated the issue

3 thought there should be special rates and fixed rates with discretion

one thought special rates should get shorter consultations!

This raised a lot of debate. It seems to boil down to the fact that lots of people want special rates of one kind or another, and generally they don't like to take responsibility for what they pay; they want us to do it for them – but cheaply! Someone pointed out that some pensioners are very well-off, while someone else said that people on benefits can be better off than low wage earners. One person suggested that homeopathy on the NHS "could be developed further"!

* *Most homeopaths feel it is an important part of the service they offer to give free phone support and remedies for 3-4 weeks after a monthly consultation.*

a) *Would you be happy to pay £1 per minute for phone advice after 3-4 weeks? (More/less?)*

38 said yes

4 said no

3 offered more than £1

11 offered less: e.g. 50p/minute (x2); £3/minute; £5/call; £5-£10/call

Although 37 "yes's" was a good response, again there was quite a lot of accompanying comment eg:

- fixed fees for 15/30/45/60 minutes otherwise "messy and pedantic"
- prefer main fee to rise rather than pay £1/minute (2)
- would be put off paying £2-£3 for short calls



- maybe limited phone support for 4-5 calls then charge for remedy/advice
- prefer fixed rate, maybe £8-£12/consultation to avoid clockwatching
- "Not happy about it but you can't put a price on health"
- set fee of £5 may be easier and ask for appointment if longer advice needed

b) *Have you ever not phoned even when you wanted to because of the costs?*

5 said no

8 said yes

2 said sometimes

one used the "Acute Helpline" instead

This means that one in seven people are put off by phone charges. A good or a bad thing? I'm not sure!

c) *After 3-4 weeks most homeopaths charge £5 for a remedy posted after a phone call plus £5-£15 for the time spent selecting it. Is this good value/too much/too little?*

47 said it was good value

10 said it was too expensive

one said too little

4 didn't know or didn't answer the question

This is a good result which vindicates charging for posted remedies despite 1 in 7 saying too expensive. Other comments were:

- needs to be based on time taken to complete "episode of care" – I don't know what this means
- perhaps sliding scale of charges/time spent on phone
- would rather pay £15-£20 for the consultation as £5 could seem a lot for 2/3 pills!

c) *Is there any way the phone support system could be improved? (Phone-in times, answerphone, etc.)*

Very few people replied to this which possibly suggests that they are happy with my system, and several had never used it

Several were very grateful for the generous phone-in times, although 3 asked for pre-set times! (already given) and one asked for more time!!

Several seemed to want more answerphone availability despite not really liking to use it!

One was very happy with the Acute Helpline message on my answerphone. However, one wanted "weekends on call. Phoning a stranger is offputting" and another didn't use it for fear of a big charge

One suggested 1571 "So you can say you need to speak to someone and then be charged for the return call"

* *The Acute Helpline, 09065 343404, is a phone service run by a team of expert homeopaths in London from 9 am to midnight every day. They charge £1.50 per minute for advice (added directly to your phone bill).*

a) *Have you ever used the service?*

b) *Were you satisfied with it?*

d) *Was it good value for money?*

Sadly 60 had never used it

The 7 users were very pleased with the service and thought it good value*. One thought it was excellent**. One hadn't used it but was glad to know about it.

And one said "I think better out of hours to your own homeopath in an emergency would be far better"!

* *Would you like to pay a fixed annual fee (in monthly instalments) to cover any treatment you might require?*

a) *How much would you be prepared to pay: £30 per month? More/less/how much?*



b) Would you like a family rate of £50 per month?

More/less/how much?

Not a popular idea : 48 said no

2 happy to pay £30/month, one each at £10 and £20/month and one at £50/month for self!

6 others thought it a good idea but not needed

* Some clinic-based homeopaths offer extra services such as birth attendance, hospital visits and home visits.

Would you be interested in any of these and what would you be prepared to pay for it?

27 said no

12 said yes and 6 more appreciated current home visits

2 offered £40-£60 per session; others offered £5-£10 extra, £25 for hospital; several offered hourly rate plus a variety of transport costs; one asked for a home birth "At any cost"

* Do you think it is reasonable to be charged half fee for appointments cancelled the day before and full fee for appointments cancelled or missed on the day? If not, what would be reasonable?

The most significant response in the whole questionnaire : 46 said yes and none said no.

14 asked for emergencies or other reasons to be taken into account

One hardliner suggested full fee for any cancellation or non-attendance. Another very reasonably suggested no fee for a cancellation within 24 hours.

2 patients said the above is the same as their dentists

Overall, a very positive response

Thank you very much for your help

Please send this to Jane Hurley, 19 Morgans Quay, Teignmouth, TQ14 8XP.

Your reply can be anonymous but please add your name and address if you would like a response.

If you see a Registered homeopath some private health insurance companies will re-imburse your fees. For example, HSA will refund half your costs after 6 months of subscriptions have been paid. If you would like more information from HSA please contact them on 01264 353186 or www.hsa.co.uk

Professional costs:

* All professional homeopaths complete a minimum 3 or 4 year training at an accredited college which costs £8,000 - £10,000 plus expenses. There are no local authority grants for this training. (Certificates which can be bought after brief correspondence courses for around £200 are not recognised as professional qualifications.)

* Remedy stocks , £2,000- £4,000+.

* Membership of professional registering society (SoH, ARH, HMA) and insurance, up to £400 p.a.

* Continuing Professional Development (conferences, seminars, supervision, books), £200 - £500+ p.a.

* Administration (stationary, postage, computers, consulting rooms, accounts, etc.) £ 1,500 - £3,000+p.a.

* Car expenses for home visits, approx. £750 p.a.

