

From: Ed Humpherson
Sent: 19/03/2014 17:00 GMT
To: Will Moy
Cc: Ross Young
Subject: A&E consultants

Dear Will

Thank you for your email on 7 March relating to the publication of ad hoc statistics on Accident and Emergency (A&E) consultants by the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC), and their public use by Dr Daniel Poulter, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health.

HSCIC publishes both monthly provisional NHS workforce figures and finalised annual figures. HSCIC told us that the figures quoted by the Minister formed part of the underlying detail of provisional figures for September 2013, which were published on 19 December 2013 at <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB13161>. The figures on A&E consultants in question originate from an extract of the NHS Electronic Staff Record system which HSCIC converts into a database. Given the size of the database, HSCIC does not publish it in its entirety but produces a range of summary tables and commentary. Following publication, HSCIC will make any requested sub- or cross-classification available equally to anyone who asks (subject to confidentiality restrictions). Further details of this are in the 'Accessibility' area of the HSCIC data quality statement (see page 12 of the report at <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB13161/nhs-work-stat-sept-2013-pdf.pdf>).

In accordance with this approach, when officials from the Department of Health requested data for A&E consultants, HSCIC provided the provisional figure to them. HSCIC regarded this detail as being 'a published figure' (being part of the breakdown of the total published provisional figures for September 2013, and being available to anyone on request) and imposed no restrictions on the use of it by the Department of Health. This data then formed the basis of the statements made by the Minister. The annual (final) workforce census figures for September 2013 are expected to be published on 25 March 2014, and will include the final figure for A&E consultants.

In considering this issue in relation to the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, the UK Statistics Authority recognises that the Department of Health may ask HSCIC to provide a large number of detailed breakdowns of the information on the database, and that regarding these all as publishable ad hoc requests might impose significant practical and resource constraints. Nevertheless, it is our view that where a Minister relies on information provided in this way, the underlying data should be published at the same time to preserve equality of access to the statistics.

Accordingly, we have written to HSCIC setting out our consideration of the issue of equality of access. We have also encouraged HSCIC to explore with the Department of Health the best way of ensuring that, where data supplied to the Department then becomes the basis of a statement by a Minister, HSCIC are aware of this and the data is published appropriately. We have also drawn HSCIC's attention to ONS's own guidance on ad hoc releases - <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/best-practice/open-data/index.html> Finally, we will consider undertaking further work on the general issues of ad hoc releases, and how well the Authority's requirements are understood and implemented across Government.

I hope this reply is helpful. I would of course be delighted to discuss these issues further with you.

Kind regards

Ed

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