



BOOKMARKS: Performance ratings – the Web performing to standards?

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A discussion of the coverage on the Internet by the Department of Health and NHS trusts of the publication NHS Performance Ratings

In September 2001, the UK Government published performance ratings for every acute NHS Trust in England. This column will explore how both the Department of Health (DOH) and the individual trusts have presented this information on the Internet.

The home page for performance ratings on the DOH site is <http://www.doh.gov.uk/performance/index.html>. This page acts as both a summary page and as a contents' list through which to access the performance rating data. Also available on this page is a PDF version of the official DOH publication *NHS Performance Ratings* <http://www.doh.gov.uk/performance/performance.pdf>. Unlike the PDF version, the Web site allows access to the information concerning the ratings in many different ways. This is illustrated by looking at the indicators developed to measure performance; explanations about these indicators can be accessed by going to the 'Methodology' page or the 'Indicators' page. Details about individual trusts can be accessed in a similar variety of ways (map, various different groupings of trusts). This is in contrast to the PDF document, which presents the information as a table where the trusts are ranked according to their star rating. Unlike most DOH Web pages, the performance ratings pages don't carry a date stamp. The information contained on the DOH site is comprehensive and is user-friendly as it allows the viewer several different methods of access. The electronic information also offers the reader the chance to see all of the local trust information at once, whereas the PDF version splits the tables up so that this is awkward to do.

The DOH sites are comprehensive, but are there any other sources of information or commentary upon them?

A search via the Google search engine

<http://www.google.com> using the phrase 'NHS Performance Ratings' yielded only 99 results. Few of the non-NHS sites visited offered critical comment on the ratings, although the Google search located this page <http://www.sghms.ac.uk/depts/phs/staff/jdp/leagues.html> which does.

The page forms part of a larger Performance Monitoring section of the St George's Medical School, Department of Public Health Sciences Web site. Most sites were similar to the school league tables site <http://www.accupage.com/league-tables/nhs-trusts.htm> and simply offer links back to the DOH site. There are some locality-based sites such as Enfield Online

<http://www.enfield-online.co.uk/html/article.php?sid=60> which links directly to the detailed rating of the local trusts as well as to the more general pages of the DOH site.

What information do the trusts themselves offer?

The Google search located few pages that originated on trust Web sites. The content of these pages ranges from simple press releases, such as the one from Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust

<http://www.plymouthhospitals.org.uk/News/2001/releases/9801.htm>, to more analytical statements such as the one from NHS Sheffield <http://www.sheffield-ha.nhs.uk/hospitals/ratingexplained.htm>. One special mention should go to the information published by Ashford & St Peter's Hospitals NHS Trust <http://www.ashfordstpeters.nhs.uk/performance/pi.html>. This has been presented, for staff, in the form of questions and answers. This trust, incidentally achieved a zero rating in the exercise. Another special mention should go to the Oldham NHS Trust <http://www.oldham-tr.nwest.nhs.uk/hospital/starratings.htm>. They have

represented the information on their site but have linked category titles to the explanations contained on the DOH site. These explanations pop up in a separate window. Google located all these sites.

There are many other trusts – what of them?

Using the list of trusts located at http://www.nhs.uk/localnhservices/list_orgs.asp?ot=R__, Gateshead (2 stars), Central Manchester (2 stars), Stockport (2 stars), North Durham (2 stars), Brighton (0 stars) and Bradford (3 stars) were selected. Of these, Gateshead does not have a Web site listed under their contact details. Central Manchester and Manchester Children's University Hospitals NHS Trust <http://www.cmmc.nhs.uk/>, Stockport NHS Trust <http://www.stockport.nhs.uk/>, North Durham Health Care NHS Trust <http://www.cix.co.uk/~ndaht/> and Bradford Hospitals NHS Trust <http://www.bradfordhospitals.nhs.uk/> do not appear to have any information at all concerning the performance ratings on their sites. Brighton Health Care NHS Trust <http://www.brighton-healthcare.nhs.uk/> has one paragraph in their online bulletin for October <http://www.southerneditorial.co.uk/bulletin/oct01/>.

Summary

It would appear that there are various issues at work here with the way that the performance ratings information has been presented and used (or not). These issues range from the currency and amount of information that is available on individual trust Web sites, although North Durham's site does appear to be under construction, to issues to do with the lack of discussion about the ratings themselves. This lack of local presentation of the ratings is disappointing, as many of the indicators used really only make sense when viewed from within the local context.