

**Survey of GPs and respiratory specialists
about their experiences of diagnosing
patients with COPD and Asthma**



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Introduction

The BLF conducted a survey of 654 COPD patients earlier this year which found that nearly two fifths (39%) had been told they had both Asthma and COPD, a far higher figure than 15% figure quoted by the Quality and Outcomes Framework Expert Panel.

To understand why this was the case the BLF commissioned a survey of 776 GPs from all over the UK by doctors.net.uk. The survey results show that most have difficulty differentiating between Asthma or COPD, causing misdiagnosis and distress amongst patients. Treatment for COPD and Asthma has very different long term aims and so the BLF is now calling for these patients to be retested and their treatment reviewed if necessary.

Executive Summary

1. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is an umbrella term for a number of conditions including chronic bronchitis and emphysema. It is a progressive, irreversible lung disease which kills around 30,000 people a year in the UK - more than breast, bowel or prostate cancer.
2. Early diagnosis of COPD is vital as it allows patients to take steps to slow down the progression of the disease, and live healthy lives for longer and avoid expensive emergency care.
3. However, not enough patients are diagnosed earlier enough. There are an estimated 3.7 million people in the UK with COPD, yet only 900,000 people diagnosed with the disease. This leaves approximately 2.8 million people that are unaware they have the disease which, if left untreated, could severely restrict their lives and eventually kill them.
4. The BLF has also found that many patients do not get an accurate diagnosis. This was supported by the results of a BLF survey of 654 COPD patients which showed that nearly two fifths (39%) had been told they had both Asthma and COPD, a far higher figure than should be the case according to the Current Quality and Outcomes Framework Expert Panel which estimate that 15 per cent of patients with COPD also have asthma.
5. To understand why this was the case the BLF commissioned a survey of 776 GPs from all over the UK by Doctors.Net. The survey results show that most have difficulty differentiating between Asthma or COPD, causing misdiagnosis and distress amongst patients.
7. The survey showed that four fifths of GPs (80%) find differentiating between the Asthma and COPD quite or very challenging

8. 1 in 10 (10%) don't have appropriately trained staff to carry out or interpret spirometry testing
9. Less than a quarter (24%) are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves
10. More than a quarter (26%) do not have the training to interpret spirometry testing themselves
11. Just under a fifth (19%) say that the quality of COPD diagnosis has not changed under the current GP contract
12. More than a quarter (27%) say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the current GP contract
13. Nearly a half (48%) say the GP contract should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has Asthma or COPD
14. 95% of GPs said that it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD

Survey Methodology

Doctors.net.uk questioned 776 GPs and 100 respiratory specialists using an online survey. The survey was conducted over two weeks and included respondents from all over the UK.

Key GP Survey National Findings and regional comparisons

- **Most GP practices (88%) own or rent spirometers.** The South East coastal region has the highest percentage (96%) of practices owning or renting spirometers; Scotland has the lowest percentage (79%).
- **1 in 10 (10%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.** This rises to more than a fifth in London, where 21% of GP practices don't have appropriate trained staff to carry out spirometry testing, and nearly a fifth in Scotland where 18% of practices don't have appropriately trained staff to carry out the testing. The area with the highest percentage of GP practices with appropriately trained staff is Northern Ireland.
- **More than 1 in 10 GP practices (14%) don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.** This rises to nearly a quarter in London, where 24% of GP practices don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing. The area with the highest percentage of GP practices with appropriately trained staff is Northern Ireland.
- **Only a quarter (25%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.** This falls to one in 7 (14%) in Wales, and rises to more than a third (36%) in the East of England.
- **More than a quarter (26%) of GPs aren't trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.** This rises to more than two fifths (41%) in the North West and Wales. The East Midlands has the highest percentage of GPs (78%) who are trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- **Nearly a third (32%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.** This rises to nearly a half (49%) in Wales and falls to just over a fifth (22%) in Yorkshire & Humberside.
- According to the 65% who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma, there are 14.5% of people in the UK who have both. These numbers are higher in the North West (16.2%), the North East (17.8%), the South West (17.9%), South Central (17.3%), Wales (15.7%), London (16.1%), and the **West Midlands (20.6%)**.

GP and Respiratory Specialist Survey National Findings and regional comparisons

- **Four fifths of GPs (80%) say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.** Nearly 9 out of 10 GPs in the East Midlands (88%) say they find it very or quite challenging; Yorkshire and Humberside has the lowest percentage (73%) of GPs who find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- Approx two thirds of specialist doctors (65%) say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD
- **More than 9 in 10 (95%) of GPs in the UK say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.**
- All (100%) of GPs in the South East Coastal region say it is quite or very important; this falls to 85% in Northern Ireland.
- Nearly all (99%) of specialist doctors say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD
- **Just under a fifth (19%) of GPs in the UK say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.** This falls to one in ten (10%) in Northern Ireland, where the highest percentage of GPs (90%) say the QOF system has improved COPD diagnosis , and rises to more than a quarter (28%) in the South West.
- Just under a third (31%) of specialist doctors say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system
- **More than a quarter (27%) of GPs in the UK say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.** This rises to more than a third (33%) in Scotland and the South West and falls to less than a fifth (19%) in Northern Ireland where the highest percentage of GPs (81%) say the QOF system has improved the quality of COPD care.
- Nearly a quarter (23%) of specialist doctors say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF
- **Nearly a half (48%) of GPs in the UK say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has Asthma or COPD.** More than a half (56%) of GPs in the North East, the highest percentage in the UK, say this. Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage (38%) of GPs who say this.

- Half (50%) of specialist doctors say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying a diagnosis of either COPD or Asthma

Regional GP Survey Findings

East Midlands

- Most GP practices (88%) own or rent spirometers.
- 4% of GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- 1 in 10 (10%) of GP practices don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- A fifth (20%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- Under a fifth (18%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Just under a third (31%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 67% in the East Midlands who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 10.6% who do making it one of the lower numbers in the country.
- The East Midlands has the highest percentage (88%) of GPs who say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (94%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than a fifth (22%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- A third (33%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Nearly a half (49%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

East of England

- Most GP practices (89%) own or rent spirometers.
- Just under 1 in 10 (8%) of GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- Just under 1 in 10 (9%) of GP practices don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- The East of England has the highest percentage of GPs (36%) who are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Over a third (38%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 57% in the East of England who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 11.8% who do making it one of the lower numbers in the country.

- More than four fifths (82%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (96%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 1 in 10 (11%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- Nearly a quarter (23%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Over a half (53%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

London

- Most GP practices (83%) own or rent spirometers.
- London has the highest percentage of GP practices, over a fifth (21%) that lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- London also has the highest percentage of GP practices, nearly a quarter (24%) that lack appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- More than a quarter (28%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- Nearly a third (29%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Over a third (38%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 55% in London who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 16.1% who do making it one of the higher numbers in the country.
- Nearly four fifths (79%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (96%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 1 in 10 (15%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Over a half (55%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

North East

- Most GP practices (91%) own or rent spirometers.
- 3% of GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- Just under 1 in 10 (9%) of GP practices don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.

- Only just more than 1 in 10 (15%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Nearly a half (47%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 53% in the North East who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 17.8% who do making it one of the higher numbers in the country.
- Four fifths of GPs (80%) say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (94%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 1 in 10 (12%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- The North East has the highest percentage of GPs (56%) who say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has Asthma or COPD.

Northern Ireland

- Most GP practices (95%) own or rent spirometers.
- No GPs that responded from Northern Ireland lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing in their practices.
- Northern Ireland also has the highest percentage, nearly 9 in 10 (86%) of GP practices with appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- Nearly a third (29%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- Nearly two fifths (38%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage, less than a fifth (19%) of GPs that don't know how many people in their practice has both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 81% in Northern Ireland who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 14.6% who do making it one of the lower numbers in the country.
- Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage, less than three quarters (72%) of GPs that say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD
- Northern Ireland has the lowest percent, more than four fifths (85%) of GPs that say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- Northern Ireland has the highest percentage, 9 in 10 (90%) of GPs that say there has been an improvement in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system. Only 1 in 10 (10%) believe that has been no change.
- Northern Ireland also has the highest percentage, more than four fifths (81%) of GPs that say the quality of COPD care has improved under the QOF system. Less than a fifth (19%) believe it has stayed the same.

- Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage, less than two fifths (38%) that say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has Asthma or COPD.

North West

- Most GP practices (87%) own or rent spirometers.
- More than 1 in 10 (14%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- More than 1 in 10 GP practices (14%) don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- The North West is one of the two worst regions with only just over 1 in 10 (14%) of GPs trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- The North West is also one of the two worst regions for GPs interpreting spirometry testing themselves with more than two fifths (41%) unable to do so
- More than a third (35%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 59% in the North West who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 16.2% who do making it one of the higher numbers in the country.
- More than four fifths of GPs (82%) say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (93%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- Just under a fifth (16%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- More than a quarter (26%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- More than two fifths (44%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has Asthma or COPD.

Scotland

- Scotland has the lowest percentage (79%) of GP practices that own or rent spirometers.
- Scotland has the second highest percentage, nearly a fifth (18%) of GP practices that lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- Nearly a fifth (18%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- More than a quarter (27%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- More than a quarter (27%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- More than a fifth (22%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 74% in Scotland who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 12.3% who do making it one of the lower numbers in the country.

- Nearly 9 in 10 (86%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (96%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than a fifth (22%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- Scotland has the joint highest percentage, over a third (35%) of GPs that say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Over two fifths (42%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

South Central

- The South Central region has the joint highest percentage (96%) of GP practices that own or rent spirometers.
- The South Central region has the highest percentage of GP practices, more than 9 in 10 (92%) with appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- Nearly a fifth (18%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- Nearly a third (32%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- A fifth (20%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Nearly a third (30%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 66% in the South Central who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 17.3% who do making it one of the higher numbers in the country.
- More than four fifths (82%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (94%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- A fifth (20%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- More than a quarter (28%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Half (50%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

South East Coastal

- The South East Coastal region has the joint highest percentage (96%) of GP practices that own or rent spirometers.
- More than 1 in 10 (13%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing
- More than 1 in 10 (12%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.

- More than a quarter (27%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- The South East Coastal region has the highest percentage of GPs, over four fifths (81%) trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Nearly a third (31%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 65% in the South East Coastal Region who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 11.0% who do making it one of the lower numbers in the country.
- Over three quarters (77%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- All GPs in the South Coastal Region (100%) say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- The South East Coastal region has the joint highest percentage, over a third (35%) of GPs that say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Nearly a half (48%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

South West

- Most GP practices (92%) own or rent spirometers.
- Under 1 in 10 (5%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- Under 1 in 10 (7%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- Less than a third (31%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- More than a quarter (27%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 68% in the South West who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 17.9% who do making it one of the higher numbers in the country.
- More than three quarters (77%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (94%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- The South West has the highest percentage of GPs, more than a quarter (28%) that say that has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- A third (33%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Less than two fifths (39%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

Wales

- Most GP practices (86%) own or rent spirometers.
- Less than 1 in 10 (5%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- Over 1 in 10 (11%) GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- Wales has the joint lowest percentage with the North West (14%) of GPs trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- Wales also has the joint highest percentage, over two fifths (41%) of GPs that are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Wales has the highest percentage, nearly a half (49%) of GPs that don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 51% in Wales who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 15.7% who do making it one of the higher numbers in the country.
- Over four fifths (83%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (94%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 1 in 10 (14%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- Nearly a fifth (19%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- Nearly a half (49%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

West Midlands

- Most GP practices (90%) own or rent spirometers.
- Just under 1 in 10 (7%) of GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- Nearly a fifth (18%) of GP practices don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- More than a fifth (22%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- More than a third (37%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the 58% in the West Midlands who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 20.6% who do making it the highest number in the country.
- Nearly four fifths (79%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (92%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.

- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- More than a fifth (22%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- More than a half (54%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

Yorkshire and Humberside

- Most GP practices (93%) own or rent spirometers.
- Just under 1 in 10 (9%) of GP practices lack appropriately trained staff to carry out spirometry testing.
- 1 in 10 (10%) of GP practices don't have appropriately trained staff to interpret spirometry testing.
- A quarter (25%) of GPs are trained to carry out spirometry testing themselves.
- A quarter (25%) of GPs are not trained to interpret spirometry testing themselves.
- Just over a fifth (22%) of GPs don't know how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma.
- According to the three quarters (75%) in Yorkshire and Humberside who said they knew how many people in their practice have both COPD and Asthma there are 9.6% who do making it the lowest number in the country.
- Just under three quarters (73%) of GPs say they find it very or quite challenging to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than 9 in 10 (95%) of GPs say it is quite or very important to differentiate between Asthma and COPD.
- More than a fifth (21%) of GPs say there has been no change in the quality of COPD diagnosis under the QOF system.
- More than a quarter (27%) of GPs say the quality of COPD care has not changed under the QOF system.
- More than a half (55%) of GPs say the QOF system should reward GPs for clarifying whether a patient has asthma or COPD.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results of this survey show that most GPs have difficulty differentiating between Asthma or COPD, causing misdiagnosis and distress amongst patients. Treatment for COPD and Asthma has very different long term aims and so the BLF is now calling for these patients to be retested and their treatment reviewed if necessary.

In addition to this the BLF is also campaigning for lung function testing to become a national priority and part of the Government's Health MOT screening programme so that people with COPD can be diagnosed earlier and treated. The BLF also recommends that all GPs are fully trained to provide spirometry testing and that the GP contract should reward GPs for differentiating between Asthma and COPD.