

ESTIMATING THE CATCHMENT AREAS OF UK GENERAL MEDICAL PRACTICES

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Historically general medical practitioners (“family doctors”/“primary care physicians”) have been portrayed as service providers to a community or neighbourhood. These communities have often been found in practice to be dispersed geographically although possessed of core-periphery characteristics. Present-day policy pressures, derived in particular from the developing role of primary care trusts in the planning and delivery of primary care, are contributing however to an enhanced impetus towards a more overt neighbourhood orientation to general medical practice.

This paper is based on an integrated dataset of characteristics for some 10,000 general practices, a 2001 census OA – practice drive-time matrix, and additional census data. Multi-criteria optimisation modelling taking account of salient organisational and geographical factors derived from “ground truth data” on the reality of practice catchments has enabled the identification of idealised service areas for each general practice in England. We examine the factors that impact on the size and definition of these service areas, the policy implications of our work and the congruence between optimal and actual service areas.