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The last frontier? Autonomy, uncertainty and standardisation in Norwegian general practice.

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Background: The initiative to reduce unwarranted variation in practice through the introduction of evidence based clinical guidelines emerged from within the medical profession during the early 1990s. In later years, a focus on priority setting and cost control has been added; health authorities increasingly use clinical guidelines to secure just distribution of health care. However, general practitioners (GPs) seem to be the group of doctors that is most reluctant to follow guidelines, and repeated surveys of the barriers to using guidelines have failed to understand and thus to change clinical behaviour.

Purpose: This study explores the rationale behind GPs' reluctance to follow guidelines.

Methods: Semi-structured in depth interviews with groups of Norwegian GPs.

Results: In these interviews the general practitioner was identified as an independent generalist with a close alliance to the patient and a sceptical distance to academic medicine and health authorities. Thus these practitioners felt that guidelines conflict with their sense of clinical autonomy.

Discussion: The post-modern GP faces the predicament of either making decisions without the time to keep updated or submitting to government 'coercion' at the cost of clinical autonomy. These GPs' frustration with their professional situation highlights the need to ground the debate about resistance to standardisation of practice in the practitioners' own experiences. The study also indicates that the authorities should increase the transparency and accountability of the standardisation process.