Regional variation in delays from initial presentation to primary care and referral for specialist assessment for patients with new presentation of inflammatory arthritis: observations from the National Clinical Audit for Rheumatoid and Early Inflammatory Arthritis

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Background

Early diagnosis and treatment of inflammatory arthritis is well established as a predictor of better long term outcome for patients. In 2009 NICE published a clinical guideline (CG79) recommending that patients are referred to secondary care within 3 days of presentation to primary care with persistent symptoms.

NICE CG79 Quality Standard 1: “People with suspected persistent synovitis affecting the small joints of the hands or feet, or more than one joint, are referred to a rheumatology service within 3 working days of presentation”

In 2014 HQIP commissioned the BSR to undertake a national audit of the early management of patients presenting with inflammatory arthritis.

Methods

• All NHS rheumatology units in England and Wales were required to participate;
• Patients aged 16 and over presenting for the first time to rheumatology outpatients with suspected early inflammatory arthritis (EIA) were eligible for recruitment;
• Verbal consent was obtained from all patients;
• Date patient first presented to GP with persistent symptoms (respondents were asked to provide their best estimate if the exact date was not known) was used as the index date;
• The date of receipt of referral letter in secondary care was used as the stop date;
• Data collected over the 1st year (01/02/14–31/01/15) of this on-going audit are reported here;
• Data were collected using a web-based tool accessible through the secure N3 NHS IT network.

Results

• In total 135 secondary care units participated (94% of possible units in England and Wales);
• Data were available from 6,354 patients (of whom 4,725 (74%) were diagnosed with an inflammatory arthritis at their first visit);
• 1,072/6,354 (17%) were referred within 3 days of presentation;
• There was substantial variation across geographical regions (see table);
  • 11% achieved QS1 in the Midlands and East of England;
  • 40% achieved QS1 in Wales;
• The median delay between presentation to primary care and receipt of referral in secondary care was 34 days nationally;
• All NHS regions were receiving referrals from primary care on the day that the patient first presented to primary care;
• All NHS regions reported delays of over 350 days from the date a patient reported first seeing their GP to receipt of a referral.

Conclusions

These results show that nationally 1. fewer than one fifth of patients were referred within the NICE recommended timeframe 2. over a quarter of patients waited more than 3 months for referral 3. there is substantial variation in performance against this quality standard across services by NHS region.

The data used to calculate performance against the quality standard rely upon information at risk of recall bias, which should be considered in the interpretation.

The findings however provide for the first time robust information at a trust level across England an Wales that justify action aimed at improving services for patients with inflammatory arthritis.

Rheumatology services, GPs, commissioners and patient organisations need to work together to: 1. raise public awareness of the importance of rapid access to care; 2. promote within primary care the importance of early referral for specialist assessment; 3. highlight and address organisational barriers that impair access to specialist care.

Table: Quality Standard 1 results nationally and by NHS region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of patients recruited at baseline</th>
<th>Patient's average waiting time in days, median (IQR)</th>
<th>Patient referred within 3 days (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>6,354</td>
<td>34(8-100)</td>
<td>1,072(17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>30(8-78)</td>
<td>111(14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands and East of England</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>47(18-124)</td>
<td>157(11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North of England</td>
<td>2,129</td>
<td>34(7-102)</td>
<td>401(19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South of England</td>
<td>1,676</td>
<td>31(9-66)</td>
<td>257(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>11(1-64)</td>
<td>146(40%)</td>
</tr>
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