Developing primary palliative care

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Developing primary palliative care

Continuity of care is paramount but needs to be tailored individually

Editor—Riley suggests that completion of a form detailing palliative care management should be mandatory for general practitioners. I have spent a great deal of time promoting palliative medicine in primary care, with variable success. Much depends on the individual practitioner’s experience and interest, which probably accounts for the variable success of handover forms to communicate with out of hours services. Making this a compulsory part of general practice might bring all practice to the same level. But the initial answer to the question, “Would I be surprised if my patient died in the next 12 months?” would then make the difference. Cynical practitioners would probably answer no for nearly all of their patients, for the longer you practise the less often you are surprised.

But, in truth, for many patients in general practice the answer to this question would be no: many elderly patients who live in nursing or residential homes, nearly all patients with chronic disease, including heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, neurological disease, and so on. The workload in handing these patients over to the out of hours service would be huge, more so for the out of hours service than the individual practice.

Continuity of care for patients who most need it is paramount, including all those with chronic disease. However, more sophisticated systems are needed to meet patient needs: perhaps different systems for different diseases, possibly different systems for each stage of a disease. Whatever the system, it must meet the needs of the individual patient. This entails dialogue between primary care (including out of hours), secondary care, and tertiary care to thrash out the detail.

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Competing interests: None declared.


Primary palliative care services must be better funded by both day and night

Editor—Guthrie’s response to our editorial of 6 November on developing primary palliative care is helpful in pointing out that the new out of hours organisations are now responsible for three quarters of the week’s on call hours, while primary care teams working during the day are responsible for only a quarter. This of course means that general practitioners and district nurses working out of hours will often attend people dying at home.

Unfortunately such busy organisations are often extremely stretched to deal with the diverse out of hours workload, and hand over forms for identifying patients receiving palliative care who could deteriorate in the short term are in our experience rarely in place. Progress is being made by some practices which routinely notify NHS24 in Scotland or NHS Direct in England of such patients, as recommended, for instance, in the gold standards framework.

We do not yet know what effect the new call centre triaging and accompanying out of hours arrangements will have on helping patients to die at home if they so wish. Care by call centres can be problematic and perceived as impersonal. This underscores the urgent need to develop plans for providing 24 hour care for dying people.

As out of hours services continue to evolve, the attempt to meet the last wishes of patients, many of whom would like to die at home if they could, must not be lost sight of. This means, as Guthrie highlights, that more community nurses and social support need to be available out of hours. Ways of targeting additional support at home for those with particularly complex needs should be explored, with community providers being encouraged to make greater use of the out of hours advice available from specialist palliative care services. Otherwise, as Levack et al suggest, only those with the fewest symptoms and greatest personal resources will be able to die at home.

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Specialist palliative care in dementia

Patients with dementia are unable to access appropriate palliative care

Editor—Hughes et al suggest that specialised units with outreach and liaison are needed for palliative care of patients with dementia. The United States has taken a much more holistic approach than the United Kingdom in this area. Although several papers have been published over the past few years that highlight the need for palliative care for such patients, little more than lip service is paid to this group of patients. In our experience, even if patients with dementia develop advanced cancer they are seldom admitted to specialist palliative care units, and palliative care teams are only too ready to declare such patients as having no specialist needs or not being appropriate for their service.

Evidence shows that where psychiatry and palliative care teams collaborate well, appropriate palliative care can be delivered to patients with advanced dementia wherever they may be located. The need for bereavement care for relatives where social death occurs many months or years before the physical death must also be included.

We advocate Hughes et al’s suggestion that through outreach and liaison, palliative care for people with dementia can be delivered in the community, including in nursing and residential homes. Palliative care services need to look beyond cancer. Patients with dementia and their families have a high symptom burden and all too often are not offered or provided with the care they require.

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Competing interests: None declared.

Home based palliative care is important in developing countries... 

Managing osteoarthritis of the knee

Conclusions about use of NSAIDs are misleading

Authors' reply

Editor—Tubach et al say that we misinterpret data by confusing group responses and individual responses. They present hypothetical calculations that supposedly show a number needed to treat of 5.66 for non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) in osteoarthritic knees. Their calculations are based on a weighted mean difference of 10.1 mm on a visual analogue scale from our analysis. However, we showed that this group response value was inflated by patient selection bias in a subgroup of trials. When this subgroup of biased trials is excluded from the analysis in our paper, the unbiased weighted mean difference fell to 5.9 mm (3.8 to 7.9).

As a benchmark for response, Tubach et al have selected what the inventors termed the "minimally perceptible difference" at 9.7 mm on the visual analogue scale. A more clinically relevant benchmark in knees osteoarthrosis would be the "minimally clinically important difference," which corresponds to 19.9 mm on the scale. Using the unbiased weighted mean difference and the latter benchmark for treatment success, the remaining number needed to treat is in the 9-20 range.

Tubach et al make a point of the fact that the occasional patient may experience benefit from NSAID treatment. In our view, it seems more relevant to question if patients should be put at jeopardy for adverse effects from oral NSAIDs when only a few of them are likely to notice if their NSAID is replaced by a placebo.

We stand by our conclusion that there is a lack of evidence for clinically relevant group, and 60.1% of patients would therefore show improvement. The number of patients needed to treat is then estimated at 5.0, the same way, if the placebo group was 20±20 mm, 69.2% of patients would show improvement in this group and 84.3% in the experimental group, and the number needed to treat would then be 6.6. These examples show that using the minimal clinically perceptible difference to interpret changes at the group level is inadequate: a small variation at the group level does not mean no clinically relevant change in the individuals of the group.

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Competing interests: None declared.


Authors' reply

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Holistic approach is important

Editor—The editorial by MacAuley on managing osteoarthritis of the knee provides a welcome emphasis on the EUCLAR recommended, holistic, multidisciplinary approach to the condition.1 Excessive prescribing of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs in primary care reflects the dependence of health professionals on “medicines based evidence” rather than evidence based medicine and the chronic underinvestment in other approaches to osteoarthritis of the knee.2 No reference was made to evidence of benefit of weight loss programmes linked to exercise; this is important, since increasing levels of obesity and incident knee osteoarthritis are strongly associated.3 Even relatively small amounts of weight loss can reduce pain and improve activity levels. At the point at which knee replacement is appropriate, severely disabled patients with a high body mass index may be denied surgery. MacAuley comments that physiotherapy may delay decline. Community physiotherapists could have a central role in the treatment of knee osteoarthritis, using motivation clinical skills for individual or group exercise programmes, gait retraining, tapping, falls prevention, walking aids, footwear advice, and pain relief techniques including acupuncture and steroid injections.4 The new cohort of NHS physiotherapy practitioners with extended scope can independently assess, treat, and improve appropriate referral to orthopaedic consultants.5 A physiotherapist may be a highly appropriate lead musculoskeletal specialist in primary care, providing a functional approach to treatment to minimise disability for people with osteoarthritis of the knee and overall offering far more in a consultation than the average general practitioner.

The large community disability burden and high knee pain referral rates to orthopaedic specialists, warrant intervention at a population level and an integrated care pathway for osteoarthritis of the knee.6 Primary care trusts are in an ideal position to develop expert initiatives for patients, encourage the use of community sports facilities, and promote the work of voluntary bodies such as the Arthritis Research Campaign, which provide excellent patient information and professional education resources.

Opioids help manage pain in osteoarthritis

Editor—MacAuley raises an important point about the poor long term management of pain in osteoarthritis of the knee.7 A recent survey carried out by Arthritis Care to assess the impact of osteoarthritis on patients showed that 81% of the sample said they experience constant pain and that when their osteoarthritis is bad, 69% have difficulty carrying out even the simplest of daily household tasks.8 Exercise is undoubtedly of benefit to patients with mild to moderate osteoarthritis, so the priority of healthcare professionals should be the symptomatic relief of chronic pain. Along with paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs there is further ammunition for pain relief. Opioids can and should be considered in these patients. As stated by the Pain Society,9 the primary effect of the appropriate use of opioids in chronic pain is analgesia that leads to improved function, sleep, and reduced distress. Their use may also result in reduced use of other analgesics.

With improved education of healthcare professionals and the patient, opioid treatment can be initiated and managed in primary care through developing an individualised treatment plan in discussion with the patient. Doctors in general practice should therefore recognise that appropriate prescribing of opioids can offer a substantial improvement in a patient’s quality of life.

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Competing interests: MJ has carried out consultant work with Napp Pharmaceuticals, Pfizer, Janssen-Cilag.

United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) trial

Editor—Three brief comments on the United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) trial.1

Firstly, the data are compatible with a nominal specific effect carried by the manipulation group that has a significantly positive effect on back pain which can be enhanced by touch. If this “devil’s advocate” view is correct, the effects have little to do with spinal manipulation itself. Secondly, which of the three professional groups (chiropractors, osteopaths, physiotherapists) generated the largest effect size is relevant. This might significantly influence the referral pattern. A post-hoc analysis might answer this question.

Lastly, the study monitored only serious adverse effects. Data show that minor
adverse effects occur in about 50% of patients after spinal manipulation. Such adverse effects might then also influence general practitioners’ referrals.

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Competing interests: None declared.

1 UK BEAM Trial Team. United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) randomised trial: effectiveness of physical treatments for back pain in primary care. BMJ 2004;329:1577-81. (11 December.)


What happened to participants who were not included in analysis?

Editor—The UK BEAM Trial Team has produced a broad piece of research that has attempted to answer many questions about managing chronic back pain all at the same time.1 However, I find it difficult to understand how any conclusions can be drawn from the published results if 25% of the study population were not included in the analysis (25% at three months and 26% at 12 months). Knowing what happened to these participants would be helpful because any conclusions drawn from the remaining data without an intention to treat analysis severely weaken what is a brave piece of research.

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1 UK BEAM Trial Team. United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) randomised trial: effectiveness of physical treatments for back pain in primary care. BMJ 2004;329:1577-81. (11 December.)

Is manipulation the most cost effective addition to “best care”? 

Editor—We are surprised by the conclusions of the two papers by the UK BEAM Trial Team.1,3 The authors compared three interventions: manipulation, exercise, and the combination of manipulation and exercise. They also published European guidelines for treatment of chronic low back pain (www.backpaineurope.org) the trial is rated as of high quality.1 However, the treatment effects are small, and they are not clinically significant.

Surprisingly, there are no comparisons between the treatments. So far as we can tell from the information given in the papers, simple Student’s t-tests do not show any significant differences between exercise and manipulation on Roland Morris or the physical component scale of the SF-36. The only significant difference is on the mental component scale of the SF-36; manipulation being significantly better than exercise at three months.

It is, therefore, difficult to follow why the authors feel that spinal manipulation is a cost effective addition to “best care” for back pain in general practice, and that manipulation alone may give better value for money than manipulation followed by exercise.

As we understand the papers, manipulation and best care were of equal benefit regarding clinical significance (Roland Morris), and there was no significant difference between exercise and manipulation (Roland Morris and SF-36 physical component).

Given that there is no clinical effect, we would expect that the least expensive treatment would be recommended. If any treatment should be added on to best care, we think that exercise would be the better choice because of all the other health benefits.

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Competing interests: None declared.

1 UK BEAM Trial Team. United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) randomised trial: effectiveness of physical treatments for back pain in primary care. BMJ 2004;329:1577-81. (11 December.)

2 UK BEAM Trial Team. United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) randomised trial: cost effectiveness of physical treatments for back pain in primary care. BMJ 2004;329:1581-5. (11 December.)


Manipulation alone costs more than other options so why is it recommended?

Editor—It is not clear why the UK BEAM Trial Team recommends manipulation alone for back pain because it costs more per quality adjusted life year (QALY) than exercise and manipulation combined and even slightly more than exercise alone.1 The average effect of exercise and manipulation combined is also larger than the other two in absolute terms.

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Competing interests: None declared.

1 UK BEAM Trial Team. United Kingdom back pain exercise and manipulation (UK BEAM) randomised trial: cost effectiveness of physical treatments for back pain in primary care. BMJ 2004;329:1581-5. (11 December.)

Authors’ reply

Editor—Ernst is correct that the beneficial effects UK BEAM found for manipulation could be a non-specific effect. This was a pragmatic study testing a package of manipulative treatment, not an explanatory study seeking to assess the effect of manipulation itself.

All the manipulation practitioners used a common treatment package agreed by the three professional groups.1 Any comparison between the professions would be underpowered and, because participants were allocated to therapists nearest their home, non-randomised. Such a comparison was specifically precluded when the professions agreed to the treatment package.

Ernst’s data do not support the assertion that adverse effects occur after 50% of spinal manipulations.2 Any such effects are usually minor and short lived. Set against the positive effect of being able to do one more daily activity one year later we would not expect this to influence general practitioners’ referrals decisions.

Tillet is concerned about our follow up rate. For a large nationwide trial of this nature it was, if anything, better than might be expected. Since the characteristics of those lost to follow up were consistent across all randomised groups, and the largest difference in follow up rates between treatment and control groups was only 4.1%, little risk of bias exists. Our sensitivity analysis, using the last observation carried forward, does not change our findings.

Tveito and Eriksen argue that we should recommend adding exercise to “best care” even though exercise did not produce a statistically significant benefit at one year and its overall cost is greater than either manipulation or best care. Our data do not support the premise that manipulation and exercise are equally effective.1 The average benefits of the BEAM interventions for individual patients are small. However, at a population level, our manipulation or combined packages produce an overall benefit at modest cost, as other healthcare users fell during the following year.

Church is unclear on our health economic conclusions. We are not recommending manipulation as the only treatment option. Instead we are saying that the UK BEAM manipulation package is the best strategy should the decision maker be willing to pay £8700 or more for each additional quality adjusted life year (QALY). If a decision maker is willing to pay > £8700 and < £38000 per additional QALY, combined treatment is the best strategy. When the decision maker is willing to pay < £3800 per QALY general practitioner care is the best strategy.

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Competing interests: MU has received a salary from the MRC and fees for speaking from Menarini Pharmaceuticals, the manufacturers of celecoxib and valdecoxib, and Pfizer, the manufacturers of celecoxib and valdecoxib.