The UK Lung Cancer Screening Trial: a pilot randomised controlled trial of low-dose computed tomography screening for the early detection of lung cancer

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Declared competing interests of authors: Tim Eisen has declared share ownership and corporate sponsored research from AstraZeneca. He is on the advisory boards of AVEO, Astellas, Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS), Bayer, Boehringer Ingelheim (BI), GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Novartis, Pfizer and Roche. He has declared corporate-sponsored research from Bayer, GSK and Pfizer. He has received honoraria from AVEO, Astellas, BMS, Bayer, BI, GSK, Novartis, Pfizer and Roche. Tim Eisen is on part-time leave of absense from the University of Cambridge to work in AstraZeneca as Vice President, Head of Clinical Discovery Unit.
Plain English summary

Lung cancer kills more people than any other cancer. To reduce the number of deaths, we need to detect lung cancer at an earlier stage when it can be cured. An American trial showed that chest computed tomography (CT) screening could prevent 20% of deaths from lung cancer.

In view of the above, we carried out a pilot trial of low-dose CT screening for lung cancer. To find people at high risk of lung cancer, we sent postal questionnaires about known lung cancer risk factors to 250,000 people aged 50–75 years. Very few people aged < 60 years were at high risk. Four thousand high-risk people joined the trial: half were offered a CT scan of their lungs; the others were not screened.

In total, 1994 people had a CT scan; 979 of those people had clear scans, 951 needed repeat scans because of a minor change and 64 people had major findings. Forty-two cancers have been found to date, of which 36 (85.7%) were identified at an early stage, so are potentially curable. From the scans, we also found 128 people with other conditions unrelated to lung cancer, providing these people with an earlier diagnosis.

To assess the emotional impact of lung screening, we looked at standard measures of cancer distress, anxiety and depression. Although some people, particularly those with an abnormal scan result, experienced more cancer distress, this was still at normal levels.

Our results suggest that CT screening for lung cancer could be cost-effective but further research is needed to confirm this.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 09/61/01. The contractual start date was in April 2011. The draft report began editorial review in April 2015 and was accepted for publication in December 2015. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HTA editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health.

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