Screening strategies for atrial fibrillation: a systematic review and cost-effectiveness analysis

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Declared competing interests of authors: Nicky J Welton reports that she is principal investigator on a research project funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC) Methodology Research Council Programme in collaboration with Pfizer Ltd. Pfizer Ltd part fund a junior researcher on a project that is purely methodological using historical data in an unrelated area (pain relief). Howard HZ Thom reports personal fees from Novartis Pharma AG, personal fees from Roche Pharma, personal fees from ICON plc and personal fees from Eli Lilly, outside the submitted work.

Published May 2017
DOI: 10.3310/hta21290
Plain English summary

Screening strategies for atrial fibrillation
Health Technology Assessment 2017; Vol. 21: No. 29
DOI: 10.3310/hta21290

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Atrial fibrillation is the most common heart rhythm disorder. AF is a major cause of stroke and subsequent disability and mortality. Many AF patients benefit from blood-thinning drugs (anticoagulation therapies), which have been shown to reduce the risk of an AF-related stroke. AF is often diagnosed only after an AF-related stroke. Earlier detection could prevent AF-related strokes, disability and mortality. This study aimed to assess whether or not a national screening programme for AF would represent good value for money. To do this, we reviewed studies looking at how well screening tests identify individuals with AF and also studies that compare different methods of screening. We found that a national screening programme in which older individuals (aged 65–70 years) are invited to be screened during a routine appointment with their doctor is likely to be cost-effective. There was also evidence that repeated screening every 5 years until age 80 years would prove to be of value. The screening test most likely to be cost-effective involves either a nurse taking a pulse rhythm check or a specific blood pressure monitor that is also able to detect AF. Whichever screening test is used, patients with a positive result would need to have their diagnosis confirmed by a trained doctor using an electrocardiogram machine before discussing treatment options.

New studies on (1) how to implement screening in general practice, (2) the performance of new tests (patches, smartphone/watch devices, iPads, hand-held devices) and (3) the effectiveness of screening with regard to the long-term risks of AF-related stroke and mortality would be useful.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 14/141/01. The contractual start date was in October 2014. The draft report began editorial review in June 2016 and was accepted for publication in December 2016. 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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