An evaluation of a referral management and triage system for oral surgery referrals from primary care dentists: a mixed-methods study

Joanna Goldthorpe, Tanya Walsh, Martin Tickle, Stephen Birch, Harry Hill, Caroline Sanders, Paul Coulthard and Iain A Pretty*

1Division of Psychology and Mental Health, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
2Division of Dentistry, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
3Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada
4Division of Population Health, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

*Corresponding author iain.pretty@manchester.ac.uk

Declared competing interests of authors: Iain Pretty is involved with the delivery of referral management services to NHS England, for which he receives financial reward. He was involved with the development of early pilot models in referral management at NHS Trafford. He was involved in the evaluation of the Index of Sedation Need (IOSN) tool. Paul Coulthard chaired the Oral Surgery and Oral Medicine Working group that developed the Guide for Commissioning Oral Surgery and Oral Medicine. This guide advocated the use of referral management systems in pathway management. He was involved in the development of the IOSN tool.

Published February 2018
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr06080

Plain English summary

Referral management and triage for oral surgery referrals
Health Services and Delivery Research 2018; Vol. 6: No. 8
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr06080
NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk
Plain English summary

People who need teeth extracted will often be referred from their dentist to a hospital. This is usually because the surgery is complicated, or they may have medical conditions that make treatment in a regular practice riskier. However, hospitals are under a lot of pressure and are often an expensive way of delivering care. Our research looked at how new high-street specialists might be able to provide some hospital services for dental patients. We tested an online referral management system, designed to make sure that patients were sent to the right place for care, and we looked at outcomes across the whole system, including cost savings and views of patients and NHS staff.

We undertook this study over 3 years and found that patients were most interested in quick care that resolved their pain, rather than the setting where surgery was provided. Patients reported being as happy in high-street (primary care) settings as in hospitals. We found that specialists could look at electronic referrals and assess, safely, which patients should go to primary care and which patients should still attend hospitals. General dental practitioners could refer patients easily with a web-based system, and the quality of their referrals improved. When we looked at cost savings we found that offering the high-street services as an alternative to hospital provision may have the potential to save money, although this depended on the costs charged to the NHS by individual hospital trusts.

It will be necessary to look at the process for other types of medicine referrals, such as those for skin disease, to see if these positive findings can be replicated.
Criteria for inclusion in the Health Services and Delivery Research journal
Reports are published in Health Services and Delivery Research (HS&DR) if (1) they have resulted from work for the HS&DR programme or programmes which preceded the HS&DR programme, and (2) they are of a sufficiently high scientific quality as assessed by the reviewers and editors.

HS&DR programme
The Health Services and Delivery Research (HS&DR) programme, part of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), was established to fund a broad range of research. It combines the strengths and contributions of two previous NIHR research programmes: the Health Services Research (HSR) programme and the Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO) programme, which were merged in January 2012.

The HS&DR programme aims to produce rigorous and relevant evidence on the quality, access and organisation of health services including costs and outcomes, as well as research on implementation. The programme will enhance the strategic focus on research that matters to the NHS and is keen to support ambitious evaluative research to improve health services.

For more information about the HS&DR programme please visit the website: http://www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/programmes/hsdr

This report
The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its preceding programmes as project number 11/1022/15. The contractual start date was in December 2012. The final report began editorial review in March 2017 and was accepted for publication in July 2017. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report 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 HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. 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 HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

© Queen’s Printer and Controller of HMSO 2018. This work was produced by Goldthorpe et al. under the terms of a commissioning contract issued by the Secretary of State for Health. This issue may be freely reproduced for the purposes of private research and study and extracts (or indeed, the full report) may be included in professional journals provided that suitable acknowledgement is made and the reproduction is not associated with any form of advertising. Applications for commercial reproduction should be addressed to: NIHR Journals Library, National Institute for Health Research, Evaluation, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre, Alpha House, University of Southampton Science Park, Southampton SO16 7NS, UK.

Published by the NIHR Journals Library (www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk), produced by Prepress Projects Ltd, Perth, Scotland (www.prepress-projects.co.uk).
Health Services and Delivery Research Editor-in-Chief

Professor Jo Rycroft-Malone  Professor of Health Services and Implementation Research, Bangor University, UK

NIHR Journals Library Editor-in-Chief

Professor Tom Walley  Director, NIHR Evaluation, Trials and Studies and Director of the EME Programme, UK

NIHR Journals Library Editors

Professor Ken Stein  Chair of HTA and EME Editorial Board and Professor of Public Health, University of Exeter Medical School, UK

Professor Andrée Le May  Chair of NIHR Journals Library Editorial Group (HS&DR, PGfAR, PHR journals)

Dr Martin Ashton-Key  Consultant in Public Health Medicine/Consultant Advisor, NETSCC, UK

Professor Matthias Beck  Professor of Management, Cork University Business School, Department of Management and Marketing, University College Cork, Ireland

Dr Tessa Crilly  Director, Crystal Blue Consulting Ltd, UK

Dr Eugenia Cronin  Senior Scientific Advisor, Crystal Blue Consulting Ltd, UK

Dr Peter Davidson  Director of the NIHR Dissemination Centre, University of Southampton, UK

Ms Tara Lamont  Scientific Advisor, NETSCC, UK

Dr Catriona McDaid  Senior Research Fellow, York Trials Unit, Department of Health Sciences, University of York, UK

Professor William McGuire  Professor of Child Health, Hull York Medical School, University of York, UK

Professor Geoffrey Meads  Professor of Wellbeing Research, University of Winchester, UK

Professor John Norrie  Chair in Medical Statistics, University of Edinburgh, UK

Professor John Powell  Consultant Clinical Adviser, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), UK

Professor James Raftery  Professor of Health Technology Assessment, Wessex Institute, Faculty of Medicine, University of Southampton, UK

Dr Rob Riemsma  Reviews Manager, Kleijnen Systematic Reviews Ltd, UK

Professor Helen Roberts  Professor of Child Health Research, UCL Institute of Child Health, UK

Professor Jonathan Ross  Professor of Sexual Health and HIV, University Hospital Birmingham, UK

Professor Helen Snooks  Professor of Health Services Research, Institute of Life Science, College of Medicine, Swansea University, UK

Professor Jim Thornton  Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, UK

Professor Martin Underwood  Director, Warwick Clinical Trials Unit, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, UK

Please visit the website for a list of members of the NIHR Journals Library Board:
www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/about/editors

Editorial contact: journals.library@nihr.ac.uk