

Influences on prescribing: the perceptions of general practitioners in two primary care trusts

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Introduction Recent initiatives from the Department of Health describe the Government's drive for quality, effectiveness and efficiency in all areas of the NHS, including prescribing.¹⁻³ The newly formed primary care trusts (PCTs) are responsible for implementing national quality measures into local practice.

We understand that there is clear prescribing guidance in national as well as local formularies. However, there is evidence from the literature that influences on prescribing are multiple and complex and that general practitioners (GPs) are reluctant to use evidence-based medicine for various reasons.⁴ Political enthusiasm encourages guideline development on both local and national levels but how this should be done is not fully described.⁵

The aim of this study is to evaluate the development and implementation of formularies and prescribing initiatives in two PCTs, and the factors influencing prescribing. The study is longitudinal, and evaluates influences from the PCTs, the initiatives and the GPs themselves on prescribing in defined areas. The findings will be used to develop a model to describe what influences practitioners' prescribing.

Method A questionnaire was designed to explore the factors GPs identified as having an influence on their prescribing. This was sent to all GPs (n=271) in two East London PCTs. The questionnaire comprised two sections: the factors perceived to influence prescribing and attitudes towards the local drug guidelines.

Responses were recorded on dichotomous (Yes/No) and five-step Likert scales. The data were entered into a database and analysed with SPSS Version 10.0. Quality control of data input was undertaken to ensure accuracy.

Results There was a 68 per cent (n=185) response rate.

The factors having greatest influence on prescribing were "recommendations from a specialist", "discussing prescribing issues with peers" and "article journals". "National and local guidelines" and "previous prescribing of drug" also had strong influences.

FOCAL POINTS

* We describe results from a postal questionnaire sent to all GPs (general practitioners) in two East London primary care trusts investigating perceived influences of prescribing and their attitudes towards the local formulary

* The strongest influencing factors on prescribing are: "the drug is recommended by a specialist or peer", "guidelines" and "GP's own previous experience of the drug"

* The weakest influencing factors are: "visits from drug representatives", "advertisements in journals and magazines" and "internet information"

* GPs need, agree and comply with local formularies but they do not use them much; still, GPs are influenced by local formularies but the influence of pharmaceutical advisers remains uncertain

* The more we know about what influences prescribing, the better we can design steering interventions so that drugs are being prescribed wisely and cost effectively

Between 86 and 91 per cent (158 and 168) of the respondents agreed to these factors.

Contrarily, "visits from drug representatives", "advertisement in journals and magazines" and "internet information" were regarded as having less influence. Between 55 and 72 per cent (100 and 130) of the population disagreed with these statements.

Over three quarters of the sample felt local guidelines were necessary for cost-effective prescribing (78 per cent, 131) and good prescribing (69 per cent, 112). Only 38 per cent (63) of the GPs admitted using the local guidelines more often than monthly.

In summary, GPs need, agree and comply with local formularies but they do not use them very much. Still, they admitted influence from local formularies, but the influence of pharmaceutical advisers on GPs seems uncertain. Many GPs needed more knowledge to use the formulary.

Discussion We next aim to investigate prescribing in the two trusts; do GPs prescribe according to formularies? How these factors relate and influence prescribing will be further explored in one-to-one interviews with GPs, which together with results from the questionnaire will inform future

outreach programmes for GPs (to be undertaken by PCT pharmacists) in the two PCTs.

The more we know about what influences prescribing, the better we can design steering interventions to make sure drugs are being prescribed wisely and cost effectively.

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